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Editorial

The theme of this issue of *Touchstone* is preaching. Preaching is among the most quotidian of Christian practices. Every week in most churches someone gets up and preaches a sermon.

What always strikes me about this feature of church life is its stubborn persistence. Since the very earliest days, preaching has been at the centre whenever Christians gather for worship. Today, it is one of the few occasions when people, on a regular basis, sit and listen to another person talking. And when churches are looking for a new minister, invariably one of the first things they want is "good preaching."

The English word "preach" has its roots in the Latin *praedicare*, meaning "to speak before" or "to proclaim." Preaching is proclamation. It is connected to the ministry of the prophets who dared to speak in the name of the Lord, proclaiming in human words the Word of God. Jesus' ministry was centred on the proclamation that the Kingdom of God had arrived. Luke tells us that one of his first acts was to preach a sermon in his hometown synagogue, announcing to the assembled congregation that the words of the prophet Isaiah were fulfilled in their hearing. The Greek word for this act of proclamation was *kērussein,* from *kērux*, meaning herald, the one who brought announcements from the king of the ruler.

Preaching, then, is a lofty and a weighty responsibility. It is not simply the preacher sharing what is on his or her mind, but the conveying of a "word from the Lord." Every preacher who is serious about his or her work has felt that burden at one time or another. I recall a young minister recounting an invitation to be a guest preacher at a large church. His anxiety sky-rocketed when he mounted the pulpit where he saw the words inscribed in the wood: "Sir, we would see Jesus." Clifford Elliott, one of my homiletics professors and as fine a preacher as the United Church has ever produced, said that on more than one Sunday morning he prayed, "Lord, please send their minds off on a tangent this morning because I don't have anything worth listening to." That's the burden of the preacher.

The history of preaching contains some pretty exalted expectations and high-falutin ideas. But if we pursue the etymology further, we discover another side. Preaching is meant to be grounded in the everyday. As often happened, the vocabulary of preaching was borrowed from the conventional terminology of ancient Greco-Roman life. The most common New Testament word for "church," for example, was *ekklesia* which was not a religious gathering at all, but a town-hall meeting. And so the word "sermon" comes from the Latin *sermonem*, not an especially holy or religious word but one that simply meant "discourse" or "talk." Some have

suggested that it has an older sense of "to line up" or "string together." Hence, a sermon is a stringing together of words. Likewise, "homily" comes from the Greek *homilos*, meaning "an assembly" and *homilia,* meaning "conversation." Furthermore, the decline of the status of religion in general and churches, has led to a degradation of our own terminology. "Preach" often is used pejoratively as a synonym for "pontificate" or "harangue." A sermon means a dull and drawn-out monologue.

So the whole idea of preaching brings together and holds in tension the transcendent and the down-to-earth, the holy and the common. Every preacher knows this from experience. One's words, strung together with greater haste than we would have preferred, squeezed into the relentless demands of ministry and life; limited by the preacher's own shortcomings of thought, syntax and delivery, somehow become God's chosen means to mediate the Word of God to the people of God. That we are even doing such a thing, after so long a time, is a wonder in itself.

I am conscious that not all *Touchstone* readers are preachers. But I am also aware that a sermon is an event in the life of the church, the *ekklesia.* It has two necessary dimensions: speaking and hearing. Like most preachers, I have been asked from time to time by those who listen "How do you write a sermon? How do you decide what to preach on? Where do you get your background information? What goes into getting ready to preach?" Answering those questions is trickier than it first seems. You can give people more than they asked for or need. Another fine teacher of homiletics, Dr. David Newman, told our class that delivering a sermon is like serving a meal. "You don't bring the pots and pans to the table" — meaning that you don't cause people's eyes to glaze over with all sorts of historical curiosities, technical jargon, scholarly controversies and so on. At the same time, I think it is both instructive and pastoral to let people know what goes into creating what the preacher delivers on a Sunday morning.

I believe that the six contributors to this theme, all of them skilled homiletical practitioners, will give to those of you who are sermon listeners rather than sermons deliverers greater insight into what is actually going on when human words announce, proclaim and apply the God's Word written in Scripture and alive in the hearts of the faithful.

Michael Knowles, who teaches homiletics at McMaster Divinity College, writes on "Preaching with Power." The power of preaching is always the power of God made known in Jesus, never the power of the preacher. It is always tempting to try to turn the sermon into an idol, a means of gaining access to the divine. But we do not control God's Word or the Holy Spirit who illuminates that Word. The paradox of preaching is

that the power of the Word comes through the powerlessness of the preacher. Preaching should always address the question, "What is God doing in the situation which the [biblical] text describes?"

Andria Irwin takes up the interesting question of whether Artificial Intelligence will fundamentally change the act of preaching. She explores the tension between unlocking the potential of technology for communication and losing the human dimension in communication. AI, while replicating human patterns of thought and language, at the end of the day is not human. AI is "an entity without the capacity to believe," a capacity only humans have.

Jeffrey Crittenden uses the Emmaus story in Luke 24 as a template for what he calls a "homiletic of testimony." He suggests an approach to preaching that is interactive and dialogical, creating space for encountering and sharing experiences of the holy.

Catherine Faith MacLean describes her own practice of regularly preaching from the Tanakh, the Bible of Judaism, what she refers to as the "early Scriptures." The Tanakh contains the same books as the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, but arranged differently, and without the underlying expectation that its texts point to Jesus. Catherine takes up issues of Christian-Jewish dialogue, faithful and imaginative exegesis and the lingering influence of Christian supersessionism.

Aaron Miller writes that there is something mysteriously unique and inexplicable about preaching that keeps people coming back to worship when they could easily spend Sunday morning doing other things. Preaching needs to remain focused on "the proclamation of God's action in and for the world." Otherwise it is easy to succumb to the temptation to keep God at a safe distance by making the sermon about us rather than God. Aaron uses Isaiah, Ezekiel, John the Baptist and Paul as homiletical case studies, accounting for the enduring importance of preaching to Christian faith and life.

In our "From the Heart" section, Molly Baskette describes her experience as a preacher. She argues that "the best preaching is local." It speaks from the heart to the hearts of the actual people who are gathered in this place to hear this word. Preaching, she writes, has a pastoral function of healing and freeing, a priestly function in which God is mediated to people, and a prophetic function that reminds us of the holy calling each of us has received.

William Haughton has written an excellent profile of Stanley Osborne, United Church minister, educator, church musician and liturgical scholar who played a key role in the 1971 *Hymn Book,* a joint venture of the United and Anglican Churches.

Four book reviews round out this issue of *Touchstone.*

A Team Effort

At a time when many journals have gone out of publication, *Touchstone* continues, after more than forty years, to offer a forum for thoughtful theological discussion. That is only possible because *Touchstone* is a labour of love for a whole team of committed individuals, none of whom gets paid for what they do. I am so appreciative of all those who make this journal possible—our writers, our editorial volunteers, and our Board members.

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PREACHING WITH POWER
by Michael P. Knowles

Every pastor wants to preach with power, so we are suckers (at least momentarily) for any writer or speaker who promises to tell us how. But this might be a good moment to admit what every experienced preacher already knows—that there is no secret formula, no sure-fire strategy, no guaranteed method for uninterrupted homiletical success. I would go so far as to say that preaching with power is not even humanly possible. It seems contradictory, but if there is indeed a secret to powerful preaching, it is the fact that we are simply incapable of it.

Nothing else in our experience functions quite the same way as does preaching. We live in a world of cause and effect; by which we achieve whatever outcomes we intend. Riding a bicycle, boiling water, building a house, or curing the common cold each requires the proper combination of tools, techniques, or strategies (on the one hand) with knowledgeable application of them (on the other). As an extension of this principle, we employ technological mechanisms (such as cell phones, computers, automobiles, and any number of "labour-saving devices") to order and regulate the world around us, constructing a sense of personal and social identity in the course of doing so. This way of thinking is such second nature that we are likely to take the same approach to Scripture and preaching as well. Unwittingly, we think of the Word of God as a tool or instrument in our hands which, when preached in the correct manner, will transform the lives of our hearers. But, shocking as it may sound, following this path comes close to idolatry. Something becomes an idol when we employ it as an instrument, tool, or means of access to the divine. An idol is a portal to the spiritual realm, employed and applied in order to influence the gods or facilitate a particular outcome that depends in whole or in part on divine intervention. If we are not careful, we will treat Scripture, especially in the course of preaching, as a means of facilitating a particular (spiritual) outcome. The goal is certainly laudable, but the intended means of accomplishing it claims too much agency and authority for the preacher. In fact, the Word of God written is no more subject to our control than is the Word of God Incarnate, Christ Himself. As unworthy servants whose proper posture is one of submission rather than command and control, we have no more power over the Word of Life than we do over the Lord of life. We don't get to stand *over* the Word that we preach because we ourselves are always *subject* to that Word and must personally yield to God's Word every bit as much as do our hearers. Nor are we in charge of the Holy Spirit, whom the Nicene Creed calls "the Lord, the Giver of life."

In short, for all its power and vitality, Scripture is not a tool or instrument for us to utilize, even for godly ends, any more than any other strategy exists to guarantee the success of our sermons or the transformation of our hearers. True spiritual transformation—resurrection! —is something only God can achieve.

The "Gospel of God" (Romans 1:1)

How, then, do sermons work, and (more to the point) what is the role of biblical exegesis for preaching? There is no denying that Paul affirms the power both of preaching and of the "Word of God" in particular. His basic principle is that apostolic preaching conveys the message of divine salvation that God has accomplished through the ministry of Christ. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel," he writes; "it is the power of God for salvation [δύναμις γὰρ θεοῦ ἐστιν εἰς σωτηρίαν] to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom 1:16). Although it would be possible to understand Paul as saying that the *preaching* of the gospel—the sermon itself—is the gospel, and therefore that the *sermon* represents the power of God for salvation, that is not what he intends. This is a subtle but important distinction. In the Hellenistic world, εὐαγγέλιον (the word that the early church appropriated for the "good news" of Christ's death and resurrection) referred to a proclamation of divine vindication or victory in human affairs, but it designated an *announcement* rather than the victory itself. In the same way, the cross of Christ (with all that it entails) cannot be reduced to the word or "message of the cross [ὁ λόγος… τοῦ σταυροῦ]" (1 Cor 1:18), since it is God's actual victory that gives power to its proclamation and not the other way around.

Accordingly, Paul receives, serves, and submits to the truth of God's saving power— which is the gospel of salvation—as the message that he has been entrusted to proclaim.

> Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the *working of his power* [κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ]. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things (Eph 3:7–9).

Such language makes it clear that the divine power that raised Jesus from death is the same power that invests preaching with authority. And, of course, it is this same dynamic that empowers discipleship in general, "for it is God who is at work in you [ὁ ἐνεργῶν ἐν ὑμῖν]," Paul tells the saints in Philippi, "enabling you both to will and to work [τὸ ἐνεργεῖν] for his good pleasure" (Phil 2:13). In either case, we must

therefore, be cautious not to claim too much for human agency.

A simple (if somewhat imperfect) illustration helps to make this point. Without exception, "labour-saving devices" run on electricity, whether delivered via a vast network of transmission equipment to the nearest wall outlet or stored in a portable battery. An artisan might be justified in claiming credit for the work they have crafted with the help of certain power tools, but they would be hard pressed to produce the same result in the absence of electricity. And pity the poor patient whose dentist chooses to drill teeth by hand! Similarly, nothing in Paul's language allows us to think that whatever power may accompany preaching is ever other than divine, delivered by fallible human means. Still, the illustration partly fails, for as every experienced preacher knows, sermons are hit-and-miss at the best of times—unpredictably so. A meticulously crafted sermon may elicit no discernible response, while the sermon that your preaching professor would certainly have failed succeeds beyond all expectation. Especially in preaching, spiritual authority remains a divine prerogative: as Karl Barth observes, "the word of God is and will and must be and remain the word *of God*"; "ours," he insists, "is not to give *birth* to God, but to give *testimony* of him."[1]

"Treasure in Clay Jars" (2 Corinthians 4:7)

Even so, the thought of preaching *with* (and not simply about) resurrection power is so intoxicating that we might easily overlook Paul's actual description of his ministry:

> When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God (1Cor 2:1–5).

At least for Paul's detractors in ancient Corinth, weakness, fear, and trembling are incompatible with godly ministry; he even quotes their contemptuous dismissal of his sermons: "They say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible'"

[1] Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* trans. Douglas Horton; (Boston: Pilgrim, 1928; reprinted New York: Harper, 1957) 125, 131.

(2 Cor 10:10). This is a strange paradox if we are seeking to discern the key to powerful preaching. Notwithstanding the fact that words and human voices are (obviously) required, the authority of apostolic preaching is not based on human wisdom, eloquence, or visual appeal. Rather, Paul proceeds on the assumption that preaching of the gospel must be attended by direct divine intervention if it is to have any effect on its hearers. Indeed, divine assistance is more obvious in the absence of all that we normally associate with efficiency, effectiveness, and authoritative speech.

In terms that his enemies would surely have endorsed, the apostle willingly concedes (even boasts) that there is nothing commendable or persuasive in his personal demeanor, discipleship, or preaching style. In fact, just the opposite:

> We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, *so that* [ἵνα] the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, *so that* [ἵνα] the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh (2 Cor 4:7–11).

Accordingly, Paul insists that "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (2 Cor 11:30). The logic behind this strange assertion is that human power, authority, and instrumental agency (whether in discipleship generally or preaching in particular) are not just inconsistent with, but even antithetical to the manifestation of divine agency. This is the logic of the cross of Christ, whereby all human efforts to serve and honour God are brought to nothing (keeping in mind, of course, that it was not sinners but the devout who condemned Jesus to death). This is the message that Paul himself preaches:

> For the word of the cross [ὁ λόγος γὰρ ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ] is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews

> and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength (1 Cor 1:18, 21–25).

Both, then, as to its content and to the manner of its conduct, the crucifixion of Christ with its paradoxical reversal of human expectations and accomplishments provides the model for apostolic ministry. As Paul goes on to explain,

> I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, *so that* [ἵνα] the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor 12:9–10).

We are likely to find Paul's use of purpose clauses both here and in Second Corinthians 4:10–11 (quoted earlier) unsettling, since the clear logic of these assertions is that human weakness—not rhetorical skill or instrumental agency—is the normal precondition for the manifestation of God's power. Yet pursuit of inability offends our sense of ourselves as capable, competent adults. Intentional dependence seems like an unwelcome return to the indignities of infancy. It is on these grounds that French theologian and sociologist Jacques Ellul can insist (alarmingly but with perfect accuracy), "Grace is odious to us . . . Grace is intolerable."[2] As preachers, we would much rather be in charge of our sermons, in a position to claim at least a little credit for whatever spiritual benefit ensues. But for this to be the case would require Christian ministry (preaching in particular) to operate differently than is true for conversion or for growth in Christ, which is to say, by means of human industry rather than by divine grace.

With a particular focus on the passages we have been examining, John Stott sums up Paul's description of apostolic ministry in the following terms:

> The central theme of Paul's Corinthian correspondence is power through weakness. We have a weak message, Christ crucified, which is proclaimed by weak preachers who are full of fear and trembling, and is received by weak hearers who are socially

[2] Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 159, 172.

> despised by the world. God chose a weak instrument (Paul) to bring a weak message (the cross) to weak people (the Corinthian working classes), but through that triple weakness he demonstrated his almighty power.[3]

As Sze-kar Wan observes, likewise commenting on Second Corinthians, "While authentic ministry does involve power and might, they are *God's*, not the minister's. An authentic minister of the gospel is characterized, ironically, not by power but by weakness—weakness that makes it necessary to rely totally on God."[4] Only when we have understood, first, the need for every preacher to join Jesus at the cross (even in the very act of preaching) so as, second, to yield thereby to God in utter dependence on the power that raised Jesus from death will we understand the meaning of a passage such as First Thessalonians 2:13:

> We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers [ἀληθῶς ἐστὶν λόγον θεοῦ, ὃς καὶ ἐνεργεῖται ἐν ὑμῖν τοῖς πιστεύουσιν].

In the absence of a cruciform perspective, we might take Paul to mean that God invests every preacher and every sermon with equivalent power, even though this is not at all our own experience. It is a strange paradox: as preachers, we lament the limited power of our words, yet it is this very limitation that compels us to rely on God to effect the transformation we ourselves cannot. "For where man's strength ends," says Luther, "God's strength begins, provided faith is present and waits on him."[5]

"Ambassadors for Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:20)

The paradoxical balance between divine agency, on the one hand, and the need for human voices, on the other, is aptly captured by Paul's declaration that "we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal

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[3] John R. W. Stott, "Power Through Weakness (1 Corinthians 1:17–2:5)," in *The Folly of Preaching: Models and Methods*, ed. Michael P. Knowles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 138.

[4] Sze-kar Wan, *Power in Weakness: The Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2000) 57–58 (emphasis original).

[5] *Luther's Works* 21:340, cited in Regin Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 16.

through us" (2 Cor 5:20). John Calvin explains:

> Because [God] does not dwell among us in visible presence... he uses the ministry of men to declare openly his will to us by mouth, as a sort of delegated work, not by transferring to them his right and honor, but only that through their mouths he may do his own work—just as a workman uses a tool to do his work... to serve as his ambassadors in the world, to be interpreters of his secret will and, in short, to represent his person.[6]

Calvin specifies that by serving as an ambassador, the preacher has access to delegated, rather than intrinsic or independent authority. Preaching is authoritative, in other words, only to the extent that it bears faithful witness to the ways and work of God in Christ: preachers and their sermons are limited rather than liberated by these powerful theological constraints. Having spoken, we must nonetheless wait upon God to confirm our words in the hearts and minds and lives of our hearers. Succinctly capturing the balance between human and divine responsibilities, Martin Luther observes that "We have the *jus verbi* [right to speak] but not the *executio* [power to accomplish]. We should preach the Word, but the results must be left solely to God's good pleasure."[7]

So how does ambassadorial authority function in practice? As ambassadors of God's reign, preachers are responsible for two kinds of exegesis, interpreting both the text of Scripture and the present moment in light of Christ. Of the two, situational exegesis is less familiar, but no less vital than biblical interpretation. Greek and Roman cities such as Philippi, Thessalonika, and Rome were formally consecrated to tutelary gods and considered sacred to pagan deities more generally. Loyalty to one's city and its gods was a fundamental civic obligation. Yet Paul (himself a Roman citizen) declares that "our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil 3:20) and tells Gentile converts in Ephesus that they are "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph 2:20 RSV; cf. 2:12). Notwithstanding continued submission to civil authority (Rom 13:1–7), their ultimate allegiance lies elsewhere. Against the spirit of the age—and

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[6] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles; ed. John McNeill Library of Christian Classics 21; (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 2:1053 (IV.iii.1).

[7] "The Second Sermon, March 10, 1522, Monday after Invocavit," in *Luther's Works, Volume 51: Sermons 1* (ed. John W. Doberstein; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 76.

its tutelary deities—the apostle reminds them that their true identity derives from the triumph of Christ. For Christian congregations today, to confess Jesus of Nazareth—crucified, risen, and ascended—as the one true Lord entails more than moral or theological obligations alone. Far more profoundly, to be a citizen by faith of God's dominion means consciously living in the presence of God, a concept summed up by the Latin tag *coram deo* (from the Vulgate of Psalm 56:13). More precisely, it is to live and die in the presence of Jesus, who has promised, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20). Preachers dare to declare that their congregants are neither alone nor powerless, whatever their circumstances; their sermons insist that Christ himself is continually— powerfully, faithfully—at work in their midst (Phil 2:13) as they face the many challenges of life. Doing so, however, requires that preachers know well the One of whom they speak, even though mature spirituality is rarely mentioned, much less taught, in seminary courses on homiletics.

In July of 1922—just over a hundred years ago—Karl Barth delivers an address entitled "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching" to a gathering of Reformed pastors at a former Cistercian monastery some 140 miles southwest of Berlin. "On Sunday morning," he tells them, "when the bells ring to call the congregation and minister to church, there is in the air an *expectancy* that something great, crucial, and even momentous is to *happen*."[8] This expectancy arises, says Barth, from people's fervent desire to know whether the Bible is true, whether the Gospel is true, and whether *God* is true in the particular sense of being vitally present with them now. Wounded and needy, perhaps, or simply curious, of every theological stripe, that is what motivates them.[9] In response to such expectation, the preacher's first exegetical task is to interpret the circumstances of the listeners with an eye to the gracious providence of God, precisely in the sense that the writer to the Hebrews quotes the testimony of Hebrew Scripture (citing Deut 31:8 and Ps 118:6):

> [God] has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you."
> So we can say with confidence,
> "The Lord is my helper;
> I will not be afraid.
> What can anyone do to me?" (Heb 13:5–6)

Again, discerning the contours of God's presence and interpreting God's

[8] Barth, *The Word of God*, 104.
[9] Barth, *The Word of God*, 107–111.

ways requires spiritual maturity—spiritual familiarity, we might say—which is of a different order than facility with liturgical leadership, pastoral counselling, parish administration, or most of the other tasks that professional clergy typically undertake.

The preacher's second exegetical task, according to Barth, is even more important: that of expounding Scripture as the Word of God. What does this mean, in practice? Barth himself underscores the fact that God *speaks* in Scripture, for those with ears to hear. But simply repeating this assertion as a matter of theological principle is not helpful; we still must ask: "What exactly does God *say*?" To state the matter more bluntly, when we search the biblical text, what are we looking for that will be worth passing on to expectant and spiritually needy hearers? At least as argued here, at the very centre of the biblical witness is not moral precepts, theological premises, or even spiritual experience in and of itself, although each has a vital place in preaching and discipleship more broadly. The focal point of biblical vision is the character and ways of God. "Show me your ways," Moses asks, "so that I may know you" (Exod 33:13). The fullest answer to that plea is Jesus himself: "Whoever has seen me," he tells Philip, "has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Spiritual experience, theological conviction, and moral conduct are each fundamentally defined by the self-revelation of God, apart from which all three will wander or fall short. "Nothing can be rightly known," writes Richard Baxter (1615–1691) in his influential work, *The Reformed Pastor*, first published in 1656, "if God be not known; nor is any study well managed, nor to any great purpose, where God is not studied. We know little of the creature, till we know it as it stands in its [relation] to God."[10]

While not neglecting the traditional tasks of grammatical analysis and historical contextualization, theological interpretation asks, "What is God doing in the situation that the text describes?" and "What does this text tell us about the character and ways of God?" For example, why does Israel's God forbid mistreatment of migrants, widows, and orphans (Exod 22:21–24), ban the use of clothing as financial collateral (Exod 22:26–27), or insist that fruit trees are not to be used for siege works (Deut 20:19)? What sort of God chooses a repentant murderer and "the meekest man in all the earth" (Num 12:3) to lead the nation out of slavery? Or an adulterer, a "man of war" and shedder of blood, as Israel's most famous king (1 Chron 28:3)? For that matter, how is it that Peter, who repeatedly denies knowing Jesus in order to save his own skin (Matt 26:69–75), and Paul,

[10] Richard Baxter, *Gildas Salvianus; The Reformed Pastor* [etc.] (London: Nevil Simmons, 1656) 265 (with minor corrections to spelling and punctuation).

who once tried to destroy the fledgling church (Gal 1:13) become its two strongest "pillars"? Even (especially!) in so obscure a text as the Apocalypse of John, the single most important question for homiletical interpretation is not its vision of human history as a whole or whether it describes present history in particular, but how God unites the saints in perfect communion amidst confusion and deadly persecution. This is the One whom congregations both want and need to know.

Exegesis of Scripture and circumstance are of a piece, for both focus, quite simply, on God. God is the true subject of our preaching and the only source of our authority. Baxter again:

> The more of God appeareth in our duties, the more authority will they have with men . . . the most reverent preacher, that speaks as if he saw the face of God, doth more affect my heart, though with common words, than an irreverent man with the most exquisite preparations. Yea, if he bawl it out with never so much seeming earnestness, if reverence be not answerable to fervency, it worketh but little.[11]

"The Power of God for Salvation" (Romans 1:16)

I began with an unexpected, possibly shocking assertion—that preaching with spiritual power is not humanly possible. Worse: it is our grasping at authority that robs our sermons of power. Just as we must die in order to live, joining Jesus at the cross, the way forward is to repent of such pretensions, submitting instead to the sole prerogative of Christ. Beyond simple prayer, this is the spiritual discipline of tranquil surrender—the posture that Anabaptist tradition calls "*gelassenheit".* Finding content for our sermons is likewise a form of yielding and submission: acknowledging God's self-revelation first (and paradigmatically) in the biblical text, as well as second, in the lives and circumstances of our hearers. Homiletical method and content are thus alike: the act of preaching, biblical exegesis, and pastoral compassion all hinge on spiritual discernment. We proclaim the ways of God both past and present, while personally relying on God in the course of doing so. In both substance and manner, preaching is simply a matter of bearing witness. All that is required of a witness is faithfulness, since testimony does not draw attention to itself, but points instead to the events that require attestation. All that is required of preachers is faithful testimony to the work and ways of God: in this consists the true "power" of preaching.

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[11] Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 128.

THE WORD, THE CALL, AND THE CHATBOT: PREACHING IN THE PRESENCE OF AI

By Andria Irwin

About 400 people gathered in the Sanctuary that evening. As my colleague and I rose to take our place in the chancel for the reflection, I prayed in my heart the same prayer I have prayed every moment just like this one: *God may my words give you glory.* The only difference was that, this time, the words I were about to preach were not really my own.

It has been a long-standing tradition in our congregation (Hillhurst United Church in Calgary) to design the second of three Christmas Eve services to connect intentionally with the younger generation. We use the Gospel of Luke according to Charlie Brown's Linus. We refer to the "word of the year" as selected by Merriam-Webster. We offer a secular Christmas song in addition to "Angels We Have Heard on High." Often, a shared dialogue replaces the traditional sermon, we invite the congregation to be wholly themselves in their relationship with the Holy. This year, that dialogue, not surprisingly, was centred on the meaning of Christmas. However, we made special note of one of the many buzzwords of 2023: Artificial Intelligence (AI).

While the notion of working AI has been a part of our cultural storyline since science fiction authors first explored the limits of their creativity, prototypes have existed in theory since the 1950s. The concept of AI—that machines could solve problems like humans, using information and independent thought—was most notably argued by mathematician and early computer scientist, Alan Turing. Turing asked the question "Can machines think?" His answer: "At the end of the century the use of words and general educated opinion will have altered so much that one will be able to speak of machines thinking without expecting to be contradicted."[1] We have found ourselves here, seventy years later, "AI" being a household word—even in church.

In the weeks leading up to our Christmas Eve service, *Broadview* Magazine in its December issue featured a conversation with Jesus, conducted using character.ai, a platform claiming on its homepage that

[1] Alan Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind* 49, no. 236 (October 1950): 433-460. For an easily digestible history of Artificial Intelligence, see the article in Harvard University's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences blog by Rockwell Anyoha titled, "The History of Artificial Intelligence." https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2017/history-artifical-intelligence/

their "breakthrough AI technology can bring all of your ideas to life," enabling users to create historical figures that can respond as if they were truly on the other end of a media call.[2] AI had been a topic of much conversation around our church office, this article only intensifying it. We adopted the axiom, "work smarter, not harder" as a joke suggesting we could ask ChatGPT[3] to draft that hard email, create that registration form, or write that sermon. The latter, of course, always evoked laughter.

Having just published a book on discipleship in a digital age in 2021, I have been shocked by how quickly the technology and my own feelings about it have changed. While I am still keen and adamant that our digital tools can be used to foster authentic connection, I am also closer to disconnecting from all of them in an effort to reclaim my own embodied experience of this life.[4]

"But what if—" my ministry colleague John Pentland responded to one of my frequent technological rants— "what if we *did* use it to preach a sermon?" I think back on Turing's prophetic paper; one day we will not think twice …

The Word

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.
John 1:1

Before anything else, God spoke. Into the formless void, into the chaos of the deep, into the unrest of the darkness, creation sprang forth from a Word. Time and time again the Holy has spoken into the earth, each time a new earth emerging.

For centuries, our human words have similarly created and destroyed the world God spoke into being. Call it our desire to make gods of ourselves or the discovery that survival has always been a part of our evolutionary existence, we speak both love and vitriol into this magnificent

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[2] Pieta Woolley, "We used an AI chatbot to speak to 'Jesus' about the climate crisis, miracles, and Christmas," *Broadview,* December 2023.

[3] ChatGPT became a household name this year, too, as the first "free-to-use AI System." Developed by Open AI, its language model and scope is the first of its kind easily accessible to you and me. You can visit https://chat.openai.com to experiment for yourself.

[4] I have taken this concept of going tech-free as a reclamation from Michael Harris's work, particularly his book *The End of Absence: Reclaiming What We've Lost in a World of Constant Connection*, (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2014).

place God blessed us with.

"Let my people go," Moses says to Pharaoh (Exodus 5:1) and the people escaped the oppressors grasp (Exodus 14:13).

"I have a dream . . ." Dr. King proclaimed from the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., and the people believed, and the people were moved, and that movement became Civil Rights history.

"Be Silent! Be Still!" Jesus cries out to the waves and they ripple outwards leaving only glass (Mark 4:39).

"The AI could do everything . . ." surprising AI skeptic and self-professed 'Cassandra', Elon Musk, said to British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, in a late November conversation and, well, we'll see.[5]

Word, both biblical and secular, has the power to create realities that were not there before. For the preacher, this is a complex task to undertake. A favorite misattributed quote says "Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary use words" ─a catchy reminder that, while our lives make way for the Word, our words often get in the way of faithful living. How do we say something about the revelation of God without mistaking our human realities for that which is being revealed?[6] It is in our own relationship with the revealed Word of God that we formulate our verbalized witness.

Different preachers, myself included, have different ways of relating to the Word as they prepare to speak to it. Prayer is consistent, though the manner of this prayer differs. A Rabbi once showed me the list of fifty questions raised by a text of fewer words. A biblical storytelling friend tells the story she is working with multiple times a day, to anyone who asks how she is, until it lives in her bones. Me, I tend to take it to the internet. I will work a phrase that has emerged in study into a prompt which I then pose to my disembodied online social circles to see what springs forth. It is the work of the people, whoever they are, wherever they are.[7]

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[5] A full video of this conversation between Rishi Sunak and Elon Musk appeared on Sunak's X account under a comment: "My conversation with @elonmusk" (@rishisunak, November 2, 2023). An unofficial transcript can be found here: https://www.englishspeecheschannel.com/english-speeches/rishi-sunak-and-elon-musk-2023/

[6] Trevor Hart, "The Word, The Words, and the Witness: Proclamation as Divine and Human Reality in the Theology of Karl Barth," *Tyndale Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (1995), 84.

[7] A banner hangs in front of the church I serve, Hillhurst United, that says, "Whoever you are, wherever you're at, Join us on the journey". It is my pastoral duty of care to live into that invitation in all the ways I can think to do so. Including the Internet.

For all of us, the task of proclamation is serious, weighty.

Just as words matter to the preacher, so too they have always mattered when it comes to the potential of technology. In 1986, *Wired* founder, Louis Rossetto, took a magazine that advertised translation software and shaped it into *Language Technology,* followed two years later by *Electric Word.* Even the titles of these early journalistic adopters in the digital realm suggest that our relationship with technology is conversational. By the time the magazine grew into *Wired* in 1993 its "countercultural rhetoric" aimed to balance "not only a new era in computing machinery, but a new era in social life."[8]

The need for a linguistic relationship with digital technology is made clear in its origin story. Designed to create, process, and store data, a language system was developed especially for this purpose so that we could communicate reciprocally. Computer codes—the cues that a computing machine uses to perform its function— are a specific application of the binary system language. These numbers enable us humans, with our uniquely expansive language ability, to guide the technology on its way. Through this relationship, the digital technology evolves over time to perform differently, to shape new meaning, to have new purpose.

Language scholar Gary Eberle suggests that "throughout our evolutionary history, human consciousness has used language to grope into the intellectual darkness. Of course, we have always used language to explain what we already knew, but, more importantly, we have also used it to reach toward what we did not yet know or understand."[9]

Language shapes not only what we are, but what the digital tools we have created are, too. The modern preacher then, at the very least, might consider him or herself contextually obligated to be open to that particular conversation.

The Call

Words, as they are spoken and as they appear on a page, were my first love. I have offered rambling soliloquys as long as I can remember, walking home from school in full dialogue with myself and another (always Jesus, but I was too full of words to hear what the Word had to say at that point).

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[8] Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 207-236.

[9] Gary Eberle, *Dangerous Words: Talking about God in an Age of Fundamentalism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2007), 8.

Words have always had for me a grand potential, an ability to paint a picture or hum a tune, to weave a web or point the way. I have always carried a notebook with me, never to take minutes as I sometimes pretend to do, but to write down interesting turns of phrase, living language that flies over the tonsils and reverberates off the boardroom walls like ricocheting scraps of soul.

It was in these soul scraps that I first heard the call to ministry. "I think you were born a preacher" a minister said to me close to twenty years ago. Her soul scraps met mine: "hah!" And it went into the notebook.

For years I collected in my own spirit the voices of others pointing to God. When Debra Bowman stood in front of an entire denominational conference and, from the pulpit, told the church to "pull up its big girl panties" I was emboldened by the Spirit's brazenness. When Janet Gear preached at the big church in the little village that "poetry is what theology wishes it could be" I was urged to let the Divine remain mysterious and to stop grasping so tightly. When I heard in a sermon on Lot's wife that "her eyes were as wide as Portuguese buns" my imagination blew wide open with the possibilities of biblical reality. As I worshipped and listened and treasured I started to witness God differently and I began to wonder. In these vocalizations of intimately unique thought I heard God, and I saw myself enter into relationship with God. In the murmurings of affirmation and the audacity of late-night phone calls I realized: my soul scraps might point people to God, too.

In 2021, as the weight of six hands rested upon me and the Minister of Vocation declared I was "called and set apart by God," I was ordained to the ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Pastoral care in the United Church of Canada. The responsibility to preach with conviction the gospel story and its living out immediately became one of the most challenging and rewarding elements of this call. But the soul of preaching has been in my questions lately.

Ordination to a ministry of the Word prompts me to wrestle with the question asked (though not answered) in this article: *Is it faithful to preach a sermon with the fingerprints of Artificial Intelligence upon its pages?*

AI is fast becoming the way we work in the future. In the conversation previously cited, Elon Musk says to Rishi Sunak, "There will come a point where no job is needed. You can have a job if you want to have a job for personal satisfaction, but the AI will be able to do everything… One of the challenges in the future will be, how do we find meaning in life if you have a magic genie that can do everything you want?"

I have modelled my understanding of ministry on Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, often quipping that I hope to do myself out of a job (but not a call). Musk's prediction of the end of work is not exactly what I had in mind. While I trust that the preacher can equip the saints, I am almost certain that an entity without the capacity to believe cannot be equipped to seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly (Micah 6:8) with the Holy. Then again, I am reminded of a fictional abbot's quote about the printing press in which he exclaims, "the word of God needs to be interpreted by priests, not spread about like dung."[10] Almost certain, but not quite. I maintain the conversation as important.

My face still flares red as I remember a non-educational experiment in which I — much to my own dismay — used ChatGPT to try to formulate a new spiritual practice for 2024 in which I go deeper in my personal prayer relationship with Christ. The response listed ten somewhat helpful suggestions that concluded with: "Consider working with a spiritual director or mentor." Mine, I am glad to confess, received a call immediately. I was mortified, but reassured. Somewhere in the 0's and 1's it was coded that the Word became flesh and lived among us (John 1:14). Somewhere in the communication between human and machine it had been made clear that who we are as believers of the Word requires our bodies. No matter how faithfully we use the tools available to us in this digital age, it is our very humanness itself that is ordained to the task. So, too, in our preaching, the Word leaves our human hearts through the machine of our throats and walks around amongst those who have had ears to hear.

How often after delivering a sermon have we been greeted by an email or a person at the door who quotes our words back to us, even though these were not the words we said? "Pastor, I loved/struggled when you said …" If only I had actually said that! The proclamation of the gospel has a Spirit of its own, a characteristic of the call that makes me both grateful and perplexed. And while I do not doubt that God can do a good thing even in the disembodied land of bots and binary,[11] "I am struck by the tension between trusting God to create through us human creatures, and trusting that God can work even through a technology that may at times give us the illusion of being godlike."

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[10] This is a story taken again from Michael Harris's work *The End of Absence* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2015), in which he refers to Blake Morrison's novel *The Justification of Johann Gutenberg*.

[11] I am indebted to Andrew O'Neill for this phraseology, and our many conversations about the efficacy of digital ministry, including the sacraments.

For over a decade I have employed practices of study and Spirit in the digital realm and recommended them to others, believing wholeheartedly in the Spirit working in and through our disembodied media. Paul Tillich's contention that the Holy Spirit shows up in secular society deeply influenced my own theological understanding that God works in ways and places I do not understand. Tillich argues that the human spirit (our own intentions) and the divine Spirit (God's intentions) co-mingle, inspiring moments of intervention that can lead to God only knows what.[12] Artificial Intelligence? Perhaps. But don't hold Tillich to that.

I have argued that the digital landscapes most of us are situated in function as "neighbourhoods," places as real as any other, open to all the opportunities of ministry that we as Christ-followers are commissioned to (Matthew 28:16-20). I have argued for the efficacy of celebrating the sacraments online, transferred people's memberships from one online congregation to another in an online service, shared presiding duties with a congregation 1500 kilometres away, flown cross-provincially to offer a funeral for a congregant who only ever attended online, and published work on how to practice discipleship in places (yes, places) like Instagram. This advocacy, however, only exists so long as there is a body to be affected, anointed, or blessed in time and space. As our technology changes and becomes less affixed to its users and its makers, I, too, have changed, becoming more reluctant in ways I never anticipated.

As a millennial I watch generations above me age out of community entirely due to an inability to connect using the technology of the world, and I feel a unique sense of duty to remain current, and invested in the conversation, not only for myself, but for those I love. It is on this scale I precariously balance my preaching in a digital age. For love of God, for love of neighbor, for love of both.[13]

The Chatbot

God, may my words give you glory, I prayed.

We introduced the Christmas story the same as we always do at 8 p.m. "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" cries

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[12] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, *Life and the Spirit: History and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963), 152, 139. I am paraphrasing myself here, as in Jason Byassee and Andria Irwin, *Following: Embodied Discipleship in a Digital Age* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic Publishing Group, 2021), 26.

[13] A rule of faith my colleague, Jason Byassee, loosely attributes to the heart of St. Augustine.

Charlie Brown, and little Linus with his Mary-blue blanket takes the proverbial pulpit and begins to speak:

"And, lo, an angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them and they were sore afraid." (Luke 2:9-12, KJV)

"That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown," Linus says, before dropping his blanket and walking offstage. As if to say, once you know the story you don't need the security blanket, there is nothing to fear.[14]

I feigned ignorance (for the sake of the dialogue!) making it clear that the Scripture said what it said but the words didn't exactly compute. And, as rehearsed, John responded with an invitation. "We could work smarter, not harder. Let's use AI to help us out." The congregation erupted with the kind of laughter that makes you realize they thought of it before you did. "It was about time," a person in the pews said later.

We had several questions for Luke's Gospel and we typed each one into the blinking space under the ChatGPT logo for all the congregation to see. Within a second the responses began to pop up. We prompted the bot to make it shorter or to keep it brief. We could have asked it to "answer like John Calvin" and it would have, probably impressively. Yet with each answer, *our own desire to preach grew.* We responded, with our own clarifying remarks, a personal story, a brief exegesis and Hebrew language study.

We asked our closing question:

You

What's the point of Christmas (short answer please)?

ChatGPT

The point of Christmas varies for individuals, but commonly, it's a time for celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ for Christians and a season of joy, generosity, and togetherness for many, regardless of religious beliefs.

When that answer popped up, our work began. The words, while superficially accurate, did not *preach*. What preached was the space between the words, giving way for us to be in relationship with the answer but not necessarily agreement, inviting us as individuals to witness to the

[14] For these words, too, I am grateful to Rev. Debra Bowman who passed on the interpretation of Linus' Christmas reading leading to a cinematic "do not be afraid" moment.

revealed and revealing God through curiosity, heart, conversation, and finally, connection.

The Prince of Peace has come into the world and yet we may not see peace. The joy of the Lord sustains us and yet we may not know joy. The togetherness of the whole people of God is made known and yet we may feel lonely. The revealed God has not given us an answer we can Google, but a relationship we can grow in, taking our words and our witness out into the world one connection at a time. It is our lives that preach, our conversations that matter, and our words that tell of the glory of the Lord that shone round about us when we were sore afraid.

As we spoke, we lit a single candle from the flame lit at the beginning of the service in celebration of the Word becoming flesh. Our words met the light and that light was passed from person to person in the pews, until the Sanctuary was awash in gold.

As we stood, we embodied the reality of the story. Into the most unlikely places, God arrives.

ON THE ROAD AGAIN: A HOMILETIC OF TESTIMONY

By Jeffrey Crittenden

"Then they told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread."[1]

Following the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, near the conclusion of the Gospel of Luke, we encounter a story of transformative pilgrimage. The road to Emmaus, a road marked solely by tradition, not signage, offers a glimpse into a "homiletic of testimony." Testimony in the Emmaus story includes several components: movement (walking together); open, vulnerable dialogue (sharing experience and perspective); and finally, sharing personal and communal transformational experience with others.

On the Road Again. As we enter 2024, many congregations and congregational leaders are asking questions about vitality and sustainability as we navigate our faithful response to our changing context. It tempting to reach for simple solutions: "Be more engaging in narrative preaching." "Forget narrative preaching and go back to three points and a poem." "Use more social media clips." "Use comedy." "Preach more like TED Talks." The list of "fixes" or "preaching for applause" goes on. Most preachers have tried a variety of approaches, some more successful than others. But when we consider the direction in which homiletics should go, I can think of no homiletical tradition more appropriate for our time than testimony. When we remember that our faith in the Living God does not depend on maintaining the brickwork of a building, or the polish or popularity of the message, but rather is a lived experience in the messiness of life, the invitation grows not only clearer but also more compelling: It is time to step out from behind the inspiring stained glass and get out on the road again.

Movement—On the Road

It is clear from the Emmaus story in Luke chapter 24 that the disciples are walking *away* from Jerusalem. Jesus has been taken from them. They have witnessed his agonizing death. They are broken-hearted. While Luke does not give us details of their relationship with Jesus, we can glean from the text that his death has had a profound effect on them.

They walk away from Jerusalem towards a village that has no historical geographical location. That is a brilliant aspect of the story. Our two travellers know about Jesus' death. They have heard stories about his

[1] Luke 24:35 (New Revised Standard Version)

resurrection, are filled with sorrow, and do the only thing that makes sense to them. They walk into an unknown future step after step. Unlike well-known pilgrimage routes such as the walk of St. James there are no yellow arrows pointing towards a cathedral of absolution. Our focus will remain on walking into a mystery.

As homileticians, we notice numerous possible points of connection between the text and our preaching. First, the geography and the terrain. Is the walk uphill along a Roman road or dirt trail? Are there stones that cause stumbling? Is there running water for refreshment? Are there soldiers to avoid? Is there shade from the sun? Are the disciples alone or are the roads filled with people? Is there food for sale? Attending to the geography of a text or story is crucial as every "location" contains the history, the context, and the stories attributed to that place.

Often when we pause to notice the geography, other aspects of the story emerge. For example, when Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount, we can imagine that those gathered are looking at him, the speaker, but that he—Jesus—is staring directly into the Roman city of Tiberius. As the Roman standards blow, the sun falls on the statues of Caesar himself. It is clear who controls the fish industry of Galilee, and there, under the watchful eye of Caesar, Jesus dares to proclaim, "Blessed are you . . ."

Or, when we hear young David utter his confident words of victory with a crooked grin to a glory-soaked Goliath, we realize that the battle is not only between two people. Historically, what is at stake is the direct trade route from the Mediterranean through the entire Fertile Crescent.

Or, as we have just finished celebrating Jesus' birth, we may notice that Mary travelled the long route through either the dangerous hills in Samaria or along the Jordan River through Jericho from Nazareth to Jerusalem/Bethlehem twice while pregnant. Or that the shepherds watching their flock, stand in the fields of Ruth and Boaz. So many layers of meaning can be found in the geography of the text. Consider the profound difference between Jesus and his cousin John. John stood in the Jordan River, and people came to see and hear him. It is interesting to ponder how many communities of faith take the John-the-Baptist approach: Come to this location, listen to this message, support this place. Even more interesting to watch is how each community of faith tries to outhustle the other so that their place is the preferred place.

Jesus, on the other hand, was always on the move. He walked into community after community meeting people where they lived, ate, worked, and played. He offered help, hope and healing. He had a hometown, a favourite area to travel, and the Temple in Jerusalem as a pilgrimage destination, but he spent his entire ministry entering into the

communities of others. A homiletic of testimony pays attention to the geography, the "geographical" context of both the text and our lives, intentionally meeting us in the places where we experience the joy and woe of life. It is time for congregations to get *On the Road Again* into the messiness of life.

Dialogue—"He made himself known to them."

The two heartbroken pilgrims heading toward Emmaus encounter a Stranger who joins them, walking with them into a mystery. Notice that the identity of the Stranger, Jesus, is revealed to the listener but not to the two travellers, naturally building into the story an opportunity for dialogue. The dialogue begins simply with the Stranger asking for further detail, which moves the conversation to the crucifixion and the empty tomb. It is fascinating that the pilgrims admit that, after hearing about the vision of angels and of Jesus being alive, they too went to the tomb but saw and experienced nothing. They received a testimony from the angels that He is alive; but they are crystal clear that they did not share this experience. They do not deny that it took place, but they experienced nothing. They are heartbroken and are walking away from the place where it happened. These details are key to a homiletic of testimony today. Many, many people, both inside and outside of our church buildings, are either waiting for an experience or are unsure about the meaning of an experience that they have had. Anselm reminds us that we have a "faith that seeks understanding."[2] Many pilgrims today either crave an experience or are wondering about an experience.

A homiletic of testimony includes open, vulnerable dialogue that shares both experience and perspective. We can draw on the experiences of those who have caught a glimpse of the Holy or., as John Wesley[3] put it, have had their "heart strangely warmed." Experiences of the presence and the absence of the divine are central. Where have I encountered our Living God— or traces of God's beauty, joy and hope? Where have I felt the painful absence of God? These are the experiences that people of faith are craving, whether communicated or not. People going through moments of profound tragedy— an untimely death, complications like a divorce, family tensions want to express concerns and tell their stories. Above all, they long to know if there is a way forward . . . if God is present. Likewise,

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[2] Thomas Williams, "Anselm of Canterbury," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/anselm/

[3] John Wesley, *John Wesley's Journal,* ed. Nehemiah Curnock, 24 May 1738.

in moments of tremendous joy—celebrating a birth, enjoying an unexpectedly arranged meal, meeting a stranger who changes our lives—people want to share their gratitude. They want to celebrate to the highest heavens. Questions emerge: without embarrassment, what story am I telling myself about this experience, and how is it impacting me and our community?

While many would like to hide their experience under a bushel, a homiletic of testimony encourages people to offer their experiences and supports them as they do. To this end, we need to reengage with our vocabulary of faith. While many are quick to dismiss words of faith as archaic, there is a power in the language that has been passed down to us. When we begin to hear the words "confession" and "assurance" not as burdening us with a sense of our unworthiness, deserving of nothing but condemnation; but rather as an invitation to be truly honest with ourselves, slow the pace and share with God our lives; when we are able to name the places where we are "stuck" —stuck in guilt or shame or situation—and then, in silence, to stop and listen for God's response. Confession and assurance become rich words of faith. Through them, like the two pilgrims walking to Emmaus, we hear the profound assurance that our Living God will journey with us as we become unstuck.

Other words in our vocabulary of faith, like forgiveness and compassion, can lead to moments of delicate and dexterous restoration of relationships one step at a time. They speak to us of something much deeper and more profound than "forgive and forget."

The Stranger on the road to Emmaus unpacked biblical stories with our two pilgrims. In so doing, he helped them gain perspective, shape meaning, and grow in understanding. Preaching as testimony helps us to recover, rediscover and reengage with our vocabulary of faith.

Finally, preaching as testimony allows voices from the past—stories of those who have gone before us, —to speak to the present. We do not turn to the saints and heroes of the faith because of their halos and perfections, but because their experiences can inform our own. How have others navigated pain, loneliness, ridicule, and adversity? How have others lived their vocabulary of faith? There is a beautiful and rich diversity of stories throughout the world and across the generations that can enlighten us. A homiletic of testimony needs leaders who can assist present-day pilgrims to explore and discover a variety of experiences and to strengthen a vocabulary of faith that can express their own experiences. Conversations of lived faith are waiting to be revealed *on the road again*.

Sharing Experience—"Then they told what had happened on the road."

Transformational experiences are meant to be shared with others. Rather than a checklist of ideas, let me offer an example from my own ministry. The congregation I serve, Metropolitan United Church in London, Ontario, started a missional congregation in the east end of London. This congregation gathers on Wednesday nights to celebrate a worship service grounded in a homiletic of testimony. The service begins by calling attention to five symbols of early Christian communities (1st and 2nd centuries): the cross, the scriptures, the bread and cup, the towel and basin, and oil. Each symbol communicates an aspect of our faith. The cross declares that God is more powerful than Caesar, and that God brings life from death. The Scriptures tell of God's relentless searching for us and our various responses. The bread and cup are symbols of an open meal where people of all classes and status could join together in worship, remembering the profound gift Jesus gave his disciples. Every time we break bread and share a cup in his name today, we do so in remembrance of him. And what do we remember? Forgiveness, compassion, healing, welcome, truth. We remember the experiences of his life, our vocabulary of faith, especially in those moments when we feel so far from them such as in moments of denial, betrayal, and running away.

The towel and basin remind us of baptism, where anyone who freely chose to enter those waters regardless of gender or status or power, emerged belonging to a community; and also of foot-washing, symbolizing the serving of neighbour and neighbourhood that God so loves. Finally, the oil, which stands first for our identity as blessed and beloved children of God, and second for healing. This symbol needs to be reclaimed. We are created in the image of God, and God provides the oil, the healing spirit, as we grow into who we are created to be.

Each person present chooses a symbol that they identify with that evening. From this moment, one or more pilgrims (participants) light the Christ candle, and share an experience of our Living God in that week or in a moment of their life. Other moments of testimony emerge in the service as prayers are offered, candles are lit and stories or words are shared that draw on our vocabulary of faith. I always find this opening time profound and moving.

A Homiletic of Testimony—"Talking with each other about all these things."

The Road to Emmaus is the road that we pilgrims of faith travel together. Moving out from behind the comfort of our buildings, once again we find ourselves *on the road again*. We are pilgrims, aware of our "geography" and its profound history then and now, deepening our vocabulary of faith in encouraging dialogue with one another, sharing experiences of our Living God as we sojourn. Surrounded by alluring narratives of power, status, and fame, our counter-narratives of vulnerability, humility and faith sustain us as we walk through the joy and woe of life. A homiletic of testimony can summon us to share experiences of help, hope, and healing; but more, to tell others and to listen to others, clearing the clutter of our souls so we are able to notice the Stranger, Jesus Christ, walking among us.

LINGERING IN THE EARLY SCRIPTURES

By Catherine Faith MacLean

Preaching as persistent call

Incessant the call is. Regular. Binding. Like clockwork, indeed *as* the clock works, Sunday morning comes around and dawn breaks and one wakens to the promise of another sermon to deliver. The birdsong that began before sunup draws our attention to the swift movement of the morning—and with it worship time. Coyotes in the valley quit their calling, snowplows begin their noise along the commuter road, and chatter begins in the mind: *Is it honest? Is it useful? Is it faithful?*

In the incessant call to preach weekly we reach for energy. Sometimes energy comes from imagination: something fresh, something old, something regarded from a new angle. Imagination is the momentum that not only keeps us going but sustains us to be inspired and generative and productive, and effective and honest and faithful. *Good grief*, we think, *I could be a bank teller*.

I was a bank teller—briefly. You laugh, perhaps, for that is as unlikely a living for me as being a parachutist or a snake handler.

I write to you from a preaching life which, if you are a preacher, may be your experience too: the constant quest for reliable confidence that my homiletical practice is as sharp and kind and prophetic and poetic as possible. I honour the confidence given to me by the church to faithfully bring the Word. I bring you, my colleagues and friends, not a strategy nor a gimmick but a specific practice that I understand to be essential right now in our listening congregations.

I am writing about the practice of preaching from the Tanakh—the Bible as Jews organize and read it. In this essay I write about some things I wish I had known better when I began the practice. I hope my reflections will be useful to you.

Waiting for Jesus

"I am waiting," she said, "waiting for Advent so I can hear about Jesus again. I'll be glad," she went on, "to greet him." I loved Inge Vermeulen and she loved me. She served me coffee at pastoral visits– coffee and Lebkuchen and the truths of her life—and her opinions about church. Sometimes when someone indicates *it isn't working*, we retreat. Sometimes we double down. I doubled down. She was waiting for Jesus. I was having the time of my life, waiting on the word from Miriam and Elijah and the stories in Judges.

Now honestly, it wasn't just me. The Worship Committee was living it up, figuring out dramas and children's stories and anthems. Board members were telling me that reading Esther emboldened them to have conversations with Jewish work colleagues about Purim. Others noticed the booth outside one of the synagogues.

Every Sunday of every autumn between Labour Day and Advent One, we explored a section of the Tanakh. We did it without Gospel or Epistle, and we did it for 15 years. That's a lot of Tanakh.

What would we discover about human nature? About people's search for God? What would we absorb about the purpose and power of community, of relationship, and of betrayal—the full reach of human emotions? Genesis and Exodus, apart from the "begats", read like Chris Hadfield's thrillers: fast-paced, lots of action. Gripping phrases seize our attention: "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." "They said to him, 'Where is your wife Sarah?". And *oh goodness gracious*—an angel of God, *God, God!* saying "What troubles you, Hagar?" It is a preacher's field of dreams.

The Power of Pulpit Memory

"I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" came the words from the pulpit. *I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.* It was 1981. The Rev. Dr. Gardner C. Taylor was the preacher. I was the student minister. *Time* Magazine led the way in calling Gardner Taylor the Dean of American preachers[1]. *I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.* I heard him preach those words, then I sang hymns and made offering and went to lunch with Gardner Taylor. All I truly recall of the day is *I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.*

How does one invoke this God? How does one do that without calling on the Holy Spirit, the Gift of Christ at Pentecost? How does one preach out of these ancient Scriptures? Could I? Would you?

"Every time a preacher delivers a sermon, he or she interprets the biblical text in some fashion," Elizabeth Achtemeier writes in her introduction to Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. She goes on to say, "Indeed, sometimes giants in the pulpit have illuminated the messages of these prophets in a way so searching and

[1] Gardner C. Taylor, 1918-1915, orator, author, grandson of emancipated enslaved people, political activist, Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient, joint founder of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Senior Pastor of Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn NY.

profound that their words have driven straight to the heart of what the prophet is saying." [2]

That's the preacher's calling, isn't it? Getting straight to the heart of what the prophet is saying. That is our day job. Ministry is the best gig in the known universe (quote me!), and those of us who do it get to go straight to the heart of what the prophet is saying.

Let the Prophets Speak for Themselves

I suggested the Tanakh project for a number of reasons. Initially I was embarrassed to admit I was bored by the lectionary. I respect the lectionary, but I was getting tired of the regularity of it and the brevity of the stories—except for the David story which went through the summer - holiday time! I wanted what was exciting my imagination to engage the congregation as well: the depth and detail and daring of the Genesis ancestors' stories, the prophets' thundering calls for justice, and the heady fascinations of apocalypse. I wanted to take the time to preach an intense esteem for the writings as they are, unimpeded by the light from a distant Bethlehem star. So I proposed to the Worship Committee a practice of preaching from the Tanakh regularly.

I love a fine presentation of Lessons and Carols. I sing snippets of *Messiah* as I wash the dishes. When I took Harrell Beck's Introduction to Old Testament as an autumn seminary course, everyone in our class was so enamoured with his teaching that we took his stated modus operandi for the course and named our Christmas sermons with it. *From Green to Brown to Green* Harrell Beck was teaching us. The trajectory of the Bible is Eden-Garden Green to the Troubled-World Brown to the New-Heaven-and New-Earth Green. Holy Fulfilment. Eschatology. Hope. Thirty-two envelopes with church bulletins from Christmas One arrived in the January mailbox of Harrell Beck, with sermons titled *From Green to Brown to Green.* Holy Fulfilment. Eschatology. Hope.

The Christian understanding of fulfilment of the Scriptures is ubiquitous in music, in visual art, in Advent with the readings from Isaiah, in Holy Week as we grind our teeth through the Gospel of John. (More on John later.)

And yet, and yet. That's not the only way into it. Let the prophets speak for themselves.

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[2] Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nahum-Malachi Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), vii.

Nomenclature

Amy-Jill Levine and Mark Zvi Brettler in *The Bible With and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently* suggest the mediaeval term, "Tanakh".[3] Tanakh is an acronym of **T**orah, **N**evi'im, and **K**etuvim; respectively the Pentateuch, the Prophets, and the "Writings." Contemporary translations are based on manuscripts of the Masoretic (Hebrew) text dating from the 6th to 10th centuries.

Levine and Brettler discuss other possible terminology for these Scriptures: Old Testament" requires a "New Testament". I may be happy being the *older* sibling in my family because I cherish my younger sibling, but they caution me that the word testament is "theologically loaded"[4]. As a synonym for covenant, a *new* testament fulfills the old. Hebrews 8:13 speaks of a *new* covenant in which Jesus makes the first one obsolete. Obsolete: I don't want to go there.

"Hebrew Bible", they say, is not accurate because some of it is written in Aramaic. "Jewish Bible" doesn't allow for it to be Christian too. "First Testament" calls for a follow-up, a "Second." Although we could argue that second violins make the string section of a symphony orchestra complete, "there is nothing positive about 'second,' as second hand, second place, and second rate all suggest."[5]

The words we use to identify the ancient texts make a difference. Inge and I talked about Scriptures that preceded Jesus. Removing the comparative of "old" and "new" went some way to removing image of a vengeful OT God and a compassionate NT Jesus. Even so, she wasn't convinced. She did truly miss Jesus.

The Tetragrammaton

Details matter. The policy statement on *United Church of Canada-Jewish Relations Today* was approved by General Council in 2003. You'll find it in *Bearing Faithful Witness: United Church-Jewish Relations Today.*[6] In it we affirm "The love of God is expressed in the giving of both Torah and

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Amy-Jill Levine and Mark Zvi Brettler in *The Bible With and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently,* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2020), 9.

[4] Levine and Brettler, 8.

[5] Levine and Brettler, 9.

[6] https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/2023-03/bearing-faithful-witness-united-church-jewish-relations-today.pdf

gospel."[7] Twenty years later and beyond we are still living into that document.

The affirmations in *Bearing Faithful Witness* caution us regarding the Tetragrammaton, the four-lettered name sometimes rendered YHWH. Those who prepared the document advise us that speaking the term is both presumptuous and arrogant. Jews regard the name of God as too holy to be uttered carelessly. When you receive the digital hymn resource *Then Let Us Sing!* you will find hymn 651 in *Voices United* revised to sing "Guide Me, O Thou Great and Holy". "Great and Holy" captures some of the meaning of the name of God without trespassing on our commitment not to speak the Tetragrammaton, nor replacing it with an artificial hybrid construction[8] such as "Jehovah".

Sermons that don't always point to Jesus

Does Scripture always point to Jesus? The purpose of this essay is to say, *No*.

I decided to preach Tanakh without Gospel illumination or Christian support from Paul or the other Epistles. Trinitarian sermons were the mark of every other week of the year. In the weeks of late Pentecost, we chose to live into the early Scriptures by allowing them to stand alone. We heard the Suffering Servant passages from Isaiah in a distinctly different way without the expectations of Holy Week. We read Daniel but left the connections with Revelation until another season.

Levine and Brettler bring their academic deliberations to bear on our habit of conflating Christian Scripture with Tanakh. They reference Luke 24:26 where Jesus asks the disciples on the road to Emmaus, "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"

> They would not have previously read their scripture as having made this claim; in the light of Jesus's suffering and death, however, the claim becomes obvious for them. Such after-the-fact reading, does not make the conclusion wrong; rather, it makes it contingent on a prior set of beliefs.[9]

[7] *Bearing Faithful Witness*, 9.
[8] *Bearing Faithful Witness*, 53.
[9] Levine and Brettler, 43.

I was interested in getting beyond the "prior set of beliefs." Levine and Brettler go on to say that "proof texting is always retrospective."[10]

One purpose of preaching is to build religious literacy. The preacher endeavours to develop informed, moral leadership in a multiracial, multireligious world. Part of our vocation is to inspire peace-making and justice-building, to make a better world for our neighbours.

Another part of our vocation is to better understand ourselves. As *A Song of Faith* puts it:

> The Spirit challenges us to celebrate the holy
> not only in what is familiar,
> but also in that which seems foreign.[11]

The practice of preaching from the Tanakh opens our perspective and teaches us about the depths of our own scriptural traditions.

Argh! Supersessionism, the zero-sum game

I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Here is the edge, the cliff, the danger - the other reason I am writing this essay.

Supersessionism is insidious. It means replacing one thing with another. Its theological use refers to the claim that God's revelation in Christ *supercedes,* or replaces, God's revelation to Israel. Supersessionism shows up in biblical studies, in hymnody, and in preaching. I get excited about the hope we have in Christ, about the promises for restoration of the earth, about truth as we know it, about the dawning of a New Age—and I get carried away. Angels begin to sing, choirs burst into refrains of enthusiastic song, congregational listeners nod their heads, children begin to dance. The hope we have in Christ is outstanding, sin-shattering, fetter-breaking, forgiveness-bestowing, life-changing. And *argh!* sometimes we slip into supersessionism. Our faith fulfills the Tanakh. Christianity replaces Judaism.

The problem is when we see the purpose of the early Scriptures as simply paving the way for the Christ. This road, with signposts through Genesis and Isaiah and Micah, can be driven as a freeway with no commuter roads, no other destinations, but rather as an expressway to the Nativity and the New Jerusalem. A *Schnellstrasse,* as the Germans call it, a "fast road," an Autobahn, if you will. Burton Z. Cooper and John S. McClure discuss supersessionism in their helpful book *Claiming Theology*

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[10] Levine and Brettler, 53.

[11] A Song of Faith https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/faith-statements/song-faith-2006

in the Pulpit. "Israel, like a John the Baptist writ large, 'prepares the way for the Lord'" they write.[12] We replace Israel. Christ fulfills Scripture and the promises. The eschatology of the church supercedes the covenant made with Moses. Supersessionism doesn't leave room for anyone else. We take over. When we move in, others must move out.

Cooper and McClure speak about hard line supersessionism, in which the faith of Israel has failed and conversion to Christianity is the only option. They speak of softer line in which Judaism is moving in stages and just isn't here yet. Both understandings are abhorrent, aren't they? And to the more insidious: Lois Wilson warns me as a Christian feminist against the insidious presentation of Judaism as a "quaint ancestor of the more enlightened church". She confronts a "radical discontinuity" in which Judaism is made an "historical scapegoat" for sexism. She reminds us that there were women religious leaders in Jesus' time.[13] She chides supersessionism in feminist garb. Ouch.

Supersessionism is stealthy. Like the target-locking missiles in Chris Hadfield's *The Defector*, this concept that the purpose of the early Scriptures is take us to the manger and the cross sneaks in to make an idol of our contemporary lives. I'm not telling you things you don't know. I'm reminding you why we do the better thing.

I live in Alberta where evangelical churches have had some play in politics. I grew up in New Brunswick's Bible Belt. And I listen to neighbours across our porous 49th parallel. In the January/February 2024 issue of *The Atlantic*, Tim Alberta published an essay titled "The Church of America: My father, my Faith, and Donald Trump". Tim Alberta's father was an evangelical pastor. He describes listening to a sermon delivered by his father's successor, Chris Winans:

> "A lot of people believe there was a religious conception of this country. A biblical conception of this country," Winans told me. For much of American history, white Christians have enjoyed tremendous wealth and influence and security. … It's easy to see why so many evangelicals believe that our country is divinely blessed. The problem is, blessings often become indistinguishable from entitlements. Once we become convinced that God has blessed something, that something can become an object of jealousy, obsession – even worship.

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[12] Burton Z. Cooper and John S. McClure, *Claiming Theology in the Pulpit*, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville: 2003). 61.

[13] *Bearing Faithful Witness*, 87-88.

> "At its root, we're talking about idolatry. … if you believe that God is in covenant with America, then you believe – and I've heard lots of people say this explicitly – that we're a new Israel," Winans said, referring to the Old Testament narrative of God's chosen nation.[14]

The New Israel: if I can criticize politics for assuming a nation can be the New Israel, ought I not also critique my own thinking that my church is the New Israel? That's an insidious kind of idolatry, isn't it? It worries me that the *Schnellstrasse* of supersessionism is an easy road that leads into such dangerous territory. A slippery slope, a fast road with no runaway truck ramp – an easy mistake. I look for nuance, but the world around me isn't patient with nuance. Levine and Brettler again: "supersessionism functions as a zero-sum game: if one group is God's elect, the other group cannot be."

Clarity, clarity, clarity may save us. A regular practice of preaching from the Tanakh may offer both preachers and their congregations the clarity we need.

Further on Anti-Semitism

Caution about accidental anti-Semitic preaching brings us to John. The power of the Gospel of John echoes in my mind, even as I am preparing sermons from Tanakh. I am not inviting Jesus into these sermons but he already in the room. It is a Christian service of worship, after all, and hymns and prayers invoke his presence. I am a Trinitarian.

The Gospel of John leads me in Advent, on Christmas Eve, and significantly through Lent and Holy Week. My heart sings with the story telling, the Word become Flesh, the Farewell Discourse, the repetitions. And yet my heart is heavy, and my song is cautious. Seeking ways to combat anti-Semitism is never off the table. Lately we preachers stand at the edge of fresh anti-Semitism. Fault lines open around us, in politics and within families and in congregations. Critical awareness catches us from falling in. Guidance from the pulpit may seem like shouting across divides, but here we are.

Constructive preaching from Tanakh can build a bridge of understanding. Our listeners can apply the knowledge and spirit they gain in a sermon to bridge the divides in their everyday lives.

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[14] Tim Alberta, "The Church of America: My father, my faith, and Donald Trump", *The Atlantic*, January/February 2024, Volume 333, No. 1, 95.

I bring you to the Gospel of John because the writer so often refers to "the Jews". Karoline Lewis has written a brilliant commentary on John which I heartily commend. Lewis argues that John reflects the "multiple Judaisms" of the first century. For whom, exactly, was this Gospel written? Lewis asks. Figuring that out helps us deal with its anti-Semitism and better understand better who our ancestors-in-faith were.

> "John 8:44 may stand as one of the most troubling verses in the entire Bible. That the accusation that the father of the Jewish leaders is the devil is put on the lips of Jesus should send chills up and down the spine of any person coming in contact with this text. Jesus said *what? when?* And to *whom?* … these words come from the mouth of Jesus, the only justification necessary for many of the atrocities lodged against the Jewish people. Once again, were preachers actually to preach on this text, perhaps our listeners would be better equipped to speak about a God who did not and cannot give up on the people God chose."[15]

Bearing Faithful Witness asks: "Do our Sunday morning services bear false witness against our Jewish neighbours today?"[16] I am grateful to Karoline Lewis for her explanations of the unyielding no-alternatives tone of the Gospel of John ("No one comes to the Father except through me"). I better understand a community that was lonely for family, friends, the faith community, and the familiar. In the incessant call, the constant chatter— *Is it honest? Is it useful? Is it faithful?* —I have learned to watch for accidental anti-Semitism in my own preaching.

"Watching a preacher climb into the pulpit is a lot like watching a tightrope walker climb onto the platform as the drum roll begins", Barbara Brown Taylor writes.[17] I am afraid of heights. But I didn't choose to be a parachutist nor a snake handler. The tightrope is suspended from my desire to preach Tanakh to Inge's coffee table.

Waiting, apart from Jesus

Jesus is in the room. Thirty years ago United Church minister, now Member of Parliament, Rev. Rob Oliphant, told me about visiting Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco. Rob talked about worship where Jesus

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[15] Karoline M. Lewis, *John*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014. 120.

[16] *Bearing Faithful Witness*, 3

[17] Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life,* Boston: Cowley Publications, 1993. 76.

wasn't named and reminded me cheekily, "It's rude to speak about someone when they're in the room."[18]

Jesus *is* in the room when we preach from the early Scriptures. But as a preacher, I don't need to reference him explicitly in every sermon. There is so much to explore without needing to always insert Jesus. I don't need to get on the fast road from the Pentateuch to the Prophecy of John.

Inge is waiting for Jesus. But I am waiting on those who came before and did not know him or expect him. I am waiting to discover how they wrestled with questions of human nature, the search for God, the purpose and power of community, of relationship, and of betrayal in the full reach of human emotions.

I have spent many autumns lingering, in no rush, with Miriam and Moses; Joseph; Esther and Ezekiel; Daniel; Joshua and Judges; David; Noah, Ruth and Naomi; Solomon, Ezra and Nehemiah; Elijah and Elisha; Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham; Isaac and Jacob. My copy of Walter Brueggemann's *Genesis* is in tatters.

The Joy

To spend your working days doing what you love and doing it well is a joy. To bring that joy to others through your chosen vocation is a responsibility—and a calling. In a world where so many *aspire* to joy in the everyday, preachers have this privilege. I hope this essay has re-inspired those of you who share the joy and responsibility of that calling to preach, and those of you who listen, week by week, to its fruits.

Incessant the call is. Regular. Binding. *Religious* … from Latin *religare:* to bind. May the clockwork of Sunday morning preaching and Tuesday morning studying and Thursday afternoon visiting-over-coffee be sustained in your practice of preaching and listening. May there be sweet Lebkuchen on the table. *May God bless you and keep you.*

[18] Rob Oliphant, personal conversations 1995 and 2004.

WHY NOT PREACH? PROCLAMATION AND THE PRESENCE OF GOD

By Aaron Miller

I remember exactly one thing from the Introduction to Psychology course I took when I was an undergraduate: what makes a theory "good" is that it can't be proven. Once something can be proven, it becomes a boring old fact. Until then, it exists in the mysterious realm of theoretical possibility.

With that in mind, I offer a theory: whatever other reasons people might give for showing up at church—community, spirituality, justice initiatives and so on—there must be a belief, subconscious at least, that there is something that they can only get or hope to get in corporate worship. There are lots of other ways to spend an hour or so a week. There are easier communities, countless other spaces open to spiritual exploration, more effective social justice organizations and sexier political movements than the church. Other bodies work more efficiently, are frequently better resourced, and (best of all) are often made up of people we would choose to hang out with. But in church, at least theoretically, we are gathered by the seemingly indiscriminate work of the Holy Spirit, with the particular purpose of encountering and (heaven help us) being encountered by the Living God. I'm convinced that this possibility—even if they might articulate it differently— is why most people show up.

There are numerous ways that encounter with the Living God might happen, some of which we have more influence over us than others. Singable, theologically rich hymns can narrow the gap between heaven and earth. The Eucharist, faithfully administered, invites us to taste and see the goodness of God. Well-crafted, Holy Spirit-guided prayers help us respond to God's primary word. But Israel and the church have always trusted that there is something profoundly important about the Word of God *preached*, for the sustenance, conviction, comfort and formation of God's people.[1]

If my theory is sound, that people are showing up, week over week, hungry for God's presence; and if preaching is one act that the Scriptures insist is indispensable when it comes to drawing near to the God who has drawn near to us, then we might as well do it with everything we've got.

Relevant Preaching?

Sadly, preaching—the proclamation of God's action in and for the world—is often neglected in favour of something easier or more palatable than a

[1] See, for instance, Nehemiah 8, or Acts 2.

disruptive Word of the Lord. That could be the offering of spiritual "life lessons," bite-sized bits of wisdom gleaned from personal experience. Not a bad thing, of course. But not the Word of the Lord. Or it might be dazzling exegesis and displays of rigorous theological study. Not bad things, either, but sometimes clever ways of missing the point.

One of the most helpful pieces of criticism I ever received about my own preaching came several years ago, shortly after I arrived in my current pastoral charge. Someone I trust, who cares deeply about the church and who will not say something if they don't think it matters, pointed out that my theology was good, my style accessible, my exegesis probing, *and* my sermons seemed to end *"just before God is about to speak."*. From many preachers, that critique might have been either easily ignored or utterly devastating. But in this case, it was true. I was preaching on a university campus, next to a seminary, to a congregation made up of people most of whom have at least one graduate degree—not to mention at least five ordained ministers on any given Sunday. And I was trying to show that I am smart enough to be here, to preach to these people, in this context. So, I was talking *about* God, displaying my theological acuity with clever turns of phrase. By the time I was done that, there was not much airspace left *for* God. These days, I try to leave a little more room for God.

One reason preachers will default to aphorisms and personal experience, theology as self-promotion, or some other means of keeping ourselves and others safe from God, is the seemingly relentless cultural concern for "relevance." The profile of any congregation looking for a new minister is more than likely will say something about "relevant preaching." Make the Bible make sense in the world as we understand it. Help us fit God into our nicely ordered lives. Give us a theology that matches our convictions or lifestyle. In fifteen minutes or less, if possible.

"I think relevance is a crock," says Eugene Peterson. "I…think people…want a place where God is taken seriously, where they're taken seriously, where there is no manipulation of their emotions or their consumer needs."[2] When it comes to the Bible (the primary and indispensable resource for Christian preaching and a metonym for the presence and action of God,) Peterson says,

> We are accustomed to thinking of the biblical world as smaller than the secular world. Tell-tale phrases give us away. We talk of

[2] https://rhettsmith.com/2005/03/i-think-relevance-is-a-crock-eugene-peterson-2/

> "making the Bible relevant to the world," as if the world is the fundamental reality and the Bible something that is going to help it or fix it. We talk of "fitting the Bible into our lives" or "making room in our day for the Bible," as if the Bible is something that can add on to or squeeze into our already full lives.[3]

The sociological reasons for our obsession with relevance are too many and too complex for the purposes of this article. Suffice it to say, however, we did not get the idea from the Bible.[4] Nor, for that matter, did we get it from most of the history of Christian proclamation. And although we can say unequivocally that our lives have to do with God and God's Word, that the God of Israel and the church is relentlessly God-with-us and God-for-us, we are impoverished when we imagine that our lives and experiences are the primary barometer of God's action. My conviction is that we gather as the church to attend to the One who can do *more* than we would ever ask or imagine, in us and through us, in the name of Jesus, God's Word made startlingly flesh, and by the Spirit who raises the dead.[5]

Biblical Witnesses

How do we avoid the temptation to prioritize relevance? The preachers in Scripture can guide us towards a much more expansive possibility. Four who call us into the broad space of God's grace, beyond the cramped conditions of our expectations and understandings are: Isaiah, Ezekiel, John the Baptist, and Paul.

Isaiah

Jesus quotes Isaiah more than any other prophet. Isaiah's words continue to capture the imaginations of those looking to be formed in the way of Jesus 2500 years after the prophet first preached.[6] Perhaps that is because

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[3] Peterson, Eugene H. *Eat this Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*. (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 2006). 167

[4] For a lengthy treatment, see Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007) For a more accessible distillation of Taylor's philosophy, I recommend the "Secular Age" series, by Andrew Root (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021).

[5] Eph 3:21-22; John 1:14.

[6] Most scholars believe that the Book of Isaiah is a compilation of the sermons and teachings of more than one prophet, over many years. Assuming that is the case, the book works because the focus and attention of those who preached in the tradition of Isaiah is essentially the same. For the purposes of this article, I will side with tradition and treat the book as a unified whole.

Isaiah never assumed that his words were his own. His vocation and calling consisted of paying attention to YHWH who speaks and then giving voice and shape to the Lord's words in the dust of everyday life. While his preaching is always contextual—that is, grounded in the particular time and place that God's people find themselves, whether in Jerusalem, or exiled in Babylon, or as exiles returned to their homeland—Isaiah's focus is never confined by context. Isaiah is relentlessly concerned with the God who is in the business of levelling mountains and raising valleys and making all things new.[7]

And yet, while Isaiah's senses may be intensely attuned to the One whose ways and thoughts are high above ours,[8] it would be inaccurate to say that his faith and confidence were superhuman. As a preacher, I am grateful for his witness in chapter 40. Here, the prophet is tasked with preaching comfort to a people run ragged by the violence of the world and the consequences of their own sin. He is commissioned to bear witness to the Lord's readiness to come in power for the salvation of his people. YHWH has tasked with heralding a new day.

A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.[9]

It is heartening for those of us who get up and try to preach week over week, sometimes with less than impressive impact, to know that even the prophet whose words shaped Jesus' ministry and mission[10] sometimes wondered what the point was. God says, "Cry out! Let the people know I'm on the move!" And Isaiah says, "Why?" What can he say? A true word from the LORD is more likely to blow these wasted people away than save them! Any preacher who says that they have never felt that way is almost certainly being less than honest. And when we feel that way, it is easier to

[7] Isa 40:4; 42:9.
[8] Isa 55:8
[9] Isa 40:6-8.
[10] Luke 4:16-21; Isa 61:1-2.

offer a few pious sounding thoughts or spend our time explaining that chapter 40 is *actually* the beginning of what the scholars call "Second Isaiah," than it is to trust that the Maker of heaven and earth has something to say, here and now, to us and through us, ready or not.

But Isaiah comes back to the point. The people are wilted grass and withered flowers, but the word of our God will stand forever. The fact is that our words and thoughts, our best will and efforts, our churches and works will not last forever. But every time we gather—even two or three of us[11]—we might just come up against the One whose unstoppable, eternal, creating and redeeming word is our truest hope. Of course, not every sermon is going to level uneven ground and smooth out rough ways and reveal the glory of God. But I think there is good precedence for showing up in our studies and pulpits expecting the possibility.

Ezekiel

If Isaiah's congregation was less than promising, Ezekiel's was hopeless—at least it seems that way in his vision recounted in chapter 37.[12] The "Valley of Dry Bones" is a marvellous lesson in what it means to preach in cahoots with the God who sets captives free and raises the dead.

The hand of the LORD brings the prophet to a valley full of bones. Nothing but skeletons, bleached by the desert sun, as far as the eye can see. The Spirit of God says, "Can these bones live?" Which, of course, is a question to which there is only one reasonable answer. Even a pre-scientific prophet of God knows that skeletons are about as dead as a body can get. So no, of course not. But Ezekiel has spent his life paying attention to the God who has a habit of doing unexpected things. So, he sighs, shrugs his shoulders, and tosses that ball back. "O LORD God, only you know the answer to that one." A crafty move by the wily prophet.

Then God tells him to preach to this valley of bones. I wonder if that is what Ezekiel was expecting when he dodged the question. "Tell these bones they'll have sinews and flesh, muscle and breath again! They'll be running around here in no time if you preach my word to them!" And the weirdest thing of all is that Ezekiel does it! He climbs up on a makeshift pulpit and he preaches. He prophesies to the bones, letting God's word do whatever God's word wants to do. And sure enough, soon he's got a vast multitude of startlingly alive people on his hands.

Ezekiel comes out of this vision, but God is not done talking. The bones are God's people, dried up and hopeless. And God is determined is

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[11] Matt 18:20.

[12] Ezek 37:1-14.

to do what God does: open graves, restore life. "You shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD."[13] Ezekiel demonstrates that the task of preaching is not to try to get a bit of God into folks who may or may not listen to us. It is not to report on the catastrophic hopelessness of things. The task of preaching is to call God's people into the promises of the One who opens graves and makes skeletons sing.

John the Baptist

John the Baptist is, in many ways, the antithesis of your average mainline Protestant preacher. No seminary degree, only the school of the wilderness; no desire to make God safe, all wild-eyed and locust-breathed. Covered in camel hair, he captures the imaginations of just about everyone. When he preaches, the crowds stream to the banks of the Jordan, wondering if maybe he is the Messiah—God's chosen redeemer of God's people.

Our first preaching lesson from John is this: John points away from himself and points to Jesus. His epitaph is "He must increase, but I must decrease."[14] In the tradition of Isaiah and Ezekiel, John is not overly concerned with his own ministry. He is laser-focused on letting God's word invade the world through him, readying everyone around him for the kingdom of heaven that's on the move.

In my less charitable moments, I am intrigued by John's willingness to call people a "brood of vipers" or let them know that if they don't shape up, they will be tossed on the bonfire with the rest of the dried wood.[15] But as a preacher my favourite story about the Baptist comes from the first chapter of the Gospel of John. John has been preaching to and baptizing throngs of folks eager for a new movement of God, with enough success that he has caught the attention of the Jerusalem religious establishment. Even they want to know what he's on about, if he is the Messiah, or Elijah returned. But John tells them that he is simply preparing the way for One whose sandal he is not worthy to untie.[16]

Then we are told that the next day he sees Jesus and declares: "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! Here's the One we've been waiting for! I've seen the very Spirit of God land on

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[13] Ezek 37:13-14.
[14] John 3:30.
[15] Luke 3:7-9.
[16] John 1:19-28.

him! He's the One!" *And nobody does anything*. Nobody pays any attention! This world-changing moment passes with a collective yawn. The next day, Jesus comes again and he shouts the same thing. And this time, two guys decide to check it out—Andrew, Simon Peter's brother and another who wasn't worth naming- which turns out to be the snowball that starts a gospel avalanche.

The point here is that it is not John's charisma, or his fetching prophetic style, his spiritual authority and wisdom, or his religious celebrity that accomplishes his mission. It is his relentless pointing to the One we have been waiting for; his willingness to proclaim and proclaim again until somebody listens. All that other stuff draws a crowd. His commitment to testifying to the Word of God made flesh changes the world.

Paul

Paul's preaching on one occasion was so boring it nearly killed a guy.[17] That always makes me feel better about people falling asleep when I preach. But more important than any particular skill was his willingness to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, whether anyone listened or not. For my money, the most important Paul story for preachers is not poor Eutychus falling out the window as Paul drones on but the apostle's preaching in Athens.[18]

It is a wonderful, rhetorically stylish sermon. Paul is properly contextual. He quotes local poets. He notes all the wild ways that Athenians are religious, referencing the altar to "an unknown god" that he saw while wandering the streets of the great city.[19] He addresses the issues of daily life in the agora. And he is preaching in the Areopagus where all the hottest thinkers gather to trade in "nothing but telling or hearing something new," which feels somehow familiar.[20] The scene anticipates the "itchy ears" that Paul will warn Timothy about.[21]

What is particularly revealing and relieving is that after Paul is finished preaching—he has given his best testimony to the goodness of God in Christ and called the crowd into the glorious rhythms of repentance and resurrection—after all that, solidly a third of the crowd laughs at him and walks away. Some would like to hear a bit more. And some become

[17] Acts 20:9.
[18] Acts 17:16-34.
[19] Acts 17:23.
[20] Acts 17:21.
[21] 2 Tim 4:3-4.

believers. I am convinced that the church is at its best and our preaching at its most faithful when we grow in comfort with the world's snickers and skepticism for the sake of those whose hearts will be strangely warmed by the grace of God. Because the ones who become believers will become disciples, formed in the will and way of Jesus, for the sake of the world—first fruits of the new creation God is working even now.

Together, these four preachers guide us in resisting the temptation to shrink God down to a manageable size, helping us to avoid the trap of trying to make what God wants to do conform to our expectations and understandings.

Why Not Preach?

The CBC ran an article recently about a United Church of Canada congregation whose lay members have risen to the task of leading their worshiping community in the absence of an ordered minister.[22] In many ways it is an encouraging story. I am heartened by the commitment of these folks and their insistence that the life and work of the church does not depend on someone with a Master of Divinity degree. Although I think ordained ministry is an important vocation in the service of Christ's church, that is not what makes the gates of hell tremble.

I was disappointed, though, to read that they are collectively opposed to the idea of preaching. According to the article, they view sermons as dry lectures, preferring life lessons for the nourishment of the congregation. The article makes it sound as if this is some kind of accomplishment, untangling God's people from the stodgy traditions of organized religion. Again, I celebrate that the sanctuary echoes with hymns each week and they have even seen some growth in attendance. They are bearing witness to God's faithfulness, I'm sure. But I wonder: why the disdain for, or disinterest in preaching?

One thing I am committed to is leadership in the United in Learning Licensed Lay Worship Leader training program. This is a four-unit, online course designed to give lay people a grounding in worship leadership, including writing prayers, crafting liturgies, scriptural engagement, and preaching.[23] The preaching unit is always one of my favourites. Students are drawn into the wonder that the Living God might just have something to say through them! The invitation to engage with Scripture, not as academics (though in conversation with them), but as

[22] https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/freshwater-united-church-no-minister-atlantic-voice-1.7053369

[23] https://churchx.ca/local/shop/catalog.php?id=2

people caught up in the good news of God for the world, is an invigorating opportunity. I try to impress on the students in my groups that their proclamation of the wonders God has worked, is working, and will work, their testimony to the grace of Christ in *their* lives, and their witness to the Holy Spirit in the world carries a special kind of weight with their lay siblings that is sometimes underappreciated by those of us who preach for our living.

It reminds me that, in the end, Christian preaching is not simply talking authoritatively about God, or badgering people into a particular way of believing or behaving. It is testimony to the God who is determined to love this world into wholeness. It is an invitation to trust that God will finally get the world God wants, and to be rooted and grounded in the love of the One who is ready and willing to do more, in us and through us, than we can ask or imagine. May it be so.

FROM THE HEART
By Molly Baskette

I probably had a little too much confidence the first time I got into a pulpit. It was the early 90s. I was a 22-year-old student minister at a comfortable upper-middle-class United Church of Christ in suburban New England. And I chose as my subject the coup that Haiti, the poorest nation in the western hemisphere, had just suffered. Full of righteous zeal, I was too much in my words to notice that the congregation was pretty disengaged, though many of them kindly said the right things in the receiving line afterward. They wanted to be encouraging, and it *was* my first sermon.

I was a leftie fundamentalist, and I didn't yet know that preaching was not about convincing the congregation to believe all the right things. Or that you really can't make people believe things at all, not without a real relationship, and an appeal to the heart–or to the limbic brain, a neuroscientist might say. Nor that good preaching is about manipulating people into believing what you want them to believe, which certainly some preachers can and do on a grand scale, and quite lucratively.

It has been 30ish years since that sermon, and I'm still a leftie, and a recovering fundamentalist. I've come to believe that the best preaching is humble and a bit uncertain. It's a cry of the heart from a preacher whose theology is not writ in stone, who has the confidence to preach a message that she is still road-testing, because that leaves room not only for intellectual humility, it also makes space for a God who is ultimately unknowable.

On the occasions when I still feel tempted to preach *at* a particular person, gently and lovingly correcting them for my perception of their sins, God usually arranges for that person to be absent from church that day.

In an age when small churches are smallifying and megachurches megatonning, trends both supercharged by the pandemic and its digital push, I still believe the best preaching is local. A sermon is an embodied message from one flawed person to other flawed people whose frailties she is at least a bit aware of. A few luminaries can preach skillfully for a large general crowd. Nadia Bolz Weber tops my list, along with Rev. Dr. William Barber, and the late great Fred Craddock. But for most of us working preachers who have to gin up a sermon at least a few times a month, what carries us through is knowing and loving our people, their particular anxieties and troubles, pain and possibility. Where they are ready to be challenged, and what needs tender comfort until it heals up. As a mentor of mine once said, "the sheep know the sounds of the shepherd's

voice." A trusting relationship, accreted over time, allows those with ears to hear.

Then again, occasionally we may have an opportunity to preach for a wider audience, or a group of people we don't know. A few years back I was invited to preach for my denomination's biennial national gathering. I was extremely nervous. I bought the statement necklace and the boots before I set a single word to the page. When the evening came, a squad of supporters from my small, scrappy and wildly creatively church were literally waiting in the wings, including our drag-queen-in-residence and a bunch of our church kids. Since I'd never been confident in my sermon endings, we'd come up with a plan to end with a dance-party flash-mob. (When in doubt: dance, and invite everyone else to dance with you. Goofy intergenerational dance parties are the gospel embodied.)

Months before I took to that convention center stage with my knees knocking in my (light teal suede) boots, I was walking with a friend who had had the same honor years earlier, and I asked her how she did it. "How did you connect with the crowd? I'm only good at preaching for people I know." She stopped walking, looked me in the eye, and said "Molly, you *do* know them." *All* preaching is local, if we remember that there are no real strangers, only siblings we haven't met yet.

One school of thought says preachers shouldn't tell personal stories. Besides the potential sin of becoming a bore (and the collateral damage of making God boring!), personal storytelling risks boundary violations. It can either enshrine the preacher in a cult of personality or put the congregation in a caretaking position. But there's a way to use personal stories to illuminate a shared experience of being human, being fallen, and hoping for better from the world and from ourselves. A story can anchor an image or idea that might otherwise blink by and disappear. Stories foster gratitude, commitment and fortitude. Stories show rather than tell about the:

> World in a Grain of Sand
> And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
> [help us] Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
> And Eternity in an hour

…that William Blake preached in his poem.

However my words and presence may (or may not) challenge, inspire, comfort, convey the presence of God to others, it is not lost on me that the great blessing of preaching is its impact on my own soul. In preparing a sermon I get to dive ever more deeply into the inky depths of our sacred text. Every week, I strengthen my spiritual muscles by wrestling a blessing from the Scripture for my own problems, fixations, faint-

heartedness. I write what I know, and I write what I need to hear myself, hoping that others get something they need by eavesdropping. As I'm writing every sermon, I stop and ask myself: "is this true; like, really true? Or do I just *want* it to be true?"

It is stunning to me that with all the competition sermons have as an art form (TED talks! Podcasts! Binge-worthy Netflix dramedies with 17 seasons!), they persist. The sermon has evolved very little since Jesus gave his splendid sermon on the mount; and we're not Jesus. And yet, every week, thousands of people tune in online or settle into their spot in the fourth pew and give their respectful attention to a single human being. I tell the folks at my church in Berkeley, birthplace of the counterculture and free speech movements, that going to church is one of the most subversive things they do, especially given how suspicious the culture around them is of Christianity these days (not without reason). It is an incredible honour, week after week, to stand in a pulpit and have people's more-or-less full attention for 12 minutes or more. We must be worthy of that attention and have something to say that is worth saying. If we find we are distracted, bored, stymied when it comes to sermon preparation, it is on us as preachers to find our muse again.

Preaching, like the role of the minister herself, has three major functions. No one sermon will do it all. The shepherd knows what the people need, week by week.

The Pastoral Function

Sermons can heal and free people. A well-crafted sermon can dismantle toxic theology instilled by bad church and override our own latent factory settings that say "God loves everyone but can't possibly love *me* because of that terrible thing I did–or am."

Just after Easter 2022, the US Supreme Court decision imperiling abortion access leaked to the press. In our left-leaning congregation, it was imperative we address this complex theological issue with sensitivity and intelligence. My colleague Rev. Kelly Colwell volunteered to preach, and it was one of the best sermons I've ever heard affirming bodily autonomy and choice. After worship and in the days to come, a number of women approached both Kelly and I to tell us, tearfully but with dignified resolve, about the illegal and dangerous abortions they'd had as young women 30, 40, 60 years ago. They felt safe enough to tell the truth–and receive affirmation denied to them for decades by their pastors, because the issue hadn't been openly or adequately addressed from the pulpit.

The Priestly Function

I often joke that I became a local church pastor because I really wanted to be a witch, but they won't give you a salary and benefits for that. Luckily, the preacher's role comes with its own sort of "magick." I'm not Pentecostal—I'm a manuscript preacher for the most part (I've tried extemporizing but who even knows what might come out of my mouth in real time with my inner editor offline?) — but that does not mean the Spirit can't work through any of us in powerful and surprising ways if we give Her a little room.

On All Saints' Day this year, I turned my sermon into a summoning spell, inviting people to call out the names of their ancestors, as many generations back as they knew their names. Eventually the voices thinned out, and silence fell over the sanctuary. We felt the ancients gather around. Tears and wonder befell us. Barbara Brown Taylor said that people come to church not for words about God but for an *experience* of God. The right words (fewer than we think!) can do this. So can truly (with humility) believing that God can work directly through us as preachers. So can strategic silence.

I especially love when a sermon releases tears and laughter. It's not about entertaining or manipulating–but the sheer gratitude of knowing a deep truth has been uncovered, someone's heart has been laid bare to themselves, something has surfaced that they can now attend to as a means of befriending God and themselves more deeply.

The Prophetic Function

Harking back to my first sermon, and about 1,000 others since then, prophetic sermons are among the trickiest to preach effectively. We need to avoid being annoying or holier-than-thou, and not lay heavy burdens on people that they are not prepared for. But we are living in dire times, and our faith urges us to name injustice and evil, and calls us to prophetic action, particularly on behalf of the most vulnerable, marginalized, dispossessed. And we are herd animals after all, inclined to influence each other, and give each other courage to collectively do together what seemed impossible on our own. In leading the flock forward, the shepherd should be within shouting distance, and sometimes whisper distance. Good preaching does more than just afflict the comfortable (something that I agree is beneficial for the comfortable). It reminds all of us, privileged and powerless, of our holy callings and our continual becoming. Prophetic preaching gives us something to reach for that is just the right distance away: far enough to make us stretch, not so far as to be discouraging.

About Sermon Endings

I used to have a really hard time with sermon beginnings. I thought I needed jokes to get people's attention. Or a gripping Moth-worthy story that would cut through all the noise. Then a teacher suggested I might try beginning with the Scripture. Eureka! Centring the sacred text makes sure it does not get lost or bent to serve our subjective purposes. I often begin by tangling with the text openly, confessing where it derails me or irritates me. People love watching a good fight.

As for sermon endings? You're on your own, friends. Endings have never been my strong suit, except when I have a drag queen and a dance flash mob as preaching partners. My favorite preacher, the aforementioned Fred Craddock, said that the best sermons have a long start and a quick ending (like the best lives). I'm a fan of chiastic structures– returning to a question or problem I raised at the beginning, and hopefully not resolving it too tidily. Life is messy, and sermons shouldn't try too hard to clip off the loose threads. Sometimes, I will discover that the sermon ending is already written into the middle of the manuscript somewhere, and yank it out. It's OK to end in the middle, because aren't we all still in the middle of it all? Leaving matters unresolved means the people in the pews might come back to hear more!

Sermon-writing and preaching is ever and always an ongoing conversation between the shepherd and her people. And naturally, it's a conversation with God, one that has a long start and hopefully no ending at all.

STANLEY L. OSBORNE
By William Haughton

Introduction

In 2001, Kenneth Inkster wrote a brief profile, *in memoriam*, of his good friend and mentor Stanley Llewellyn Osborne.[1] This admiring portrayal highlights Osborne's remarkable educational achievements—he held earned doctorates in both music and theology—his considerable influence in the field of hymnology, and the zeal of his theological convictions. It notes the striking diversity of professional roles Osborne filled over the course of his career—pastoral ministry in diverse settings, secondary school leadership and, of course, hymn book production. Not surprisingly, the greatest proportion of Inkster's profile touches on Osborne's role in the producing *The Hymn Book* (1971). Published by both the United and Anglican Churches in order to replace their existing hymnals, *The Hymn Book* remains one of the best-selling Canadian books of all time. Osborne served as Secretary of the Joint Committee on the Preparation of the Hymnal and was clearly the committee member who did the lion's share of the work. As his colleagues wrote, "The Committee wishes to pay an enthusiastic tribute to the Rev Stanley L. Osborne, BA, MUS D, TH D, the secretary of the Committee. Without his extensive knowledge of hymnology, his skill as a musician, and his indefatigable labours, this book could not have been produced. Dr Osborne has rendered invaluable service with regard to the printing of the music, the clearing of copyrights, and the general publication of the book."[2]

However, one might evaluate *The Hymn Book*—or the controversies it caused—its publication was a crowning achievement and reminds us that Osborne was a significant figure in the United Church for some forty years—by 1939 he had already co-edited *The Canadian Youth Hymnal*. In the areas of church-music, hymnody, and the theology of Christian worship, his influence spread throughout Canadian Christianity

[1] Kenneth Inkster, "The Legacy of Stanley Osborne," *The American Organist* 35, no. 4 (April 2001): 7.

[2] *The Hymn Book*, n.p.

and beyond. It will be the purpose of this brief profile to summarize Osborne's life and to revisit his legacy. I will argue that Osborne articulated a theology of worship that is insightful, stimulating, and clear. What is even more striking is the consistency and creativity with which he expressed his theological vision in practical ways over a ministry of some seventy years.

Beginnings

Osborne was born 6 January 1907 at his family's farm, just east of Bowmanville, Ontario. He was the oldest of Richard Llewellyn and Stella Maude (Stanley) Osborne's five children. He attended the local school section at Providence and then Bowmanville High School. Though the former family property is still rural and farmed today, it is by no means remote. He was a strong student, a keen musician, and close to his mother.

After leaving school, Osborne attended Victoria College, at the University of Toronto, earning a B.A. in 1929 and then a B.D. in 1932. Even at that stage, his theological thought was remarkably well-formed. His B.D. thesis, "The Petitionary Element of Prayer," articulates an understanding of prayer as our participating in our relationship with God—a conception much in keeping with what he would argue years later regarding both church music and Christian worship, in *The Strain of Praise* (1957) and elsewhere. "Atonement," he writes, is "God's search for us," while prayer, correspondingly, is "our search for Him."[3]

Pastoral Ministry

During his years at Emmanuel College, Osborne spent two summers on home mission fields in Saskatchewan—a common experience for United Church ministry candidates in earlier generations. There he saw prairie drought and the Great Depression on full display and this had a shaping influence on him.[4] In June 1932 he was ordained by the Bay of Quinte Conference. The next month, he took up his settlement post at the four-point Paradise Valley charge in east-central Alberta, where he would traverse his territory variously in a Model A Ford, on horseback and by foot. He lived in a manse affectionately known as "the Shack". Years later, Osborne would reflect fondly on this time as one of adventure and warm friendship.[5]

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[3] Stanley L. Osborne, "The Petitionary Element in Prayer," B.D. Thesis, *Victoria University* (1932), 1.

[4] Osborne, "The Petitionary Element," 66.

[5] The Paradise Valley Historical Society, *Oxen Trails to Jet Trails* (Winnipeg: Intercollegiate Press, 1981), 570.

When his year in Paradise Valley was up, Osborne returned to Ontario where he married Florence Campbell at her home in Oro Township. It isn't certain exactly when they met or became a couple, but they had been introduced by their mothers, who were long-time friends. In late-summer 1933 Osborne took a call to the Coe Hill Pastoral Charge, south of Bancroft. There were as many as six preaching points on the charge and it was still being referred to as a circuit (the old Methodist term) during Osborne's tenure. In the summer of 1935, he left to take up a call at the Hay Bay charge, near Napanee, which he served until October 1938. Official Board minutes from Coe Hill and Hay Bay suggest that Osborne was well-liked and interested in evangelism. What is perhaps even more noteworthy is how busy he must have been. In 1936, he earned a B.Mus. degree from the University of Toronto. In September 1937, he joined the Committee on the Hymn Book for Youth, which met regularly in Toronto.[6] In 1938, he joined the General Council's standing Committee on Church Worship and Ritual.[7] We can only imagine that it was difficult in the 1930s to carry on pastoral ministries in rural eastern Ontario while pursuing these other opportunities.

Given his varied interests and activities, it is perhaps not surprising that in October 1938 Osborne accepted the role of Assistant Minister at Timothy Eaton Memorial Church, Toronto. What a change in setting this was: Timothy Eaton has a grand, gothic building in the Forest Hill section of Toronto and, during Osborne's time, had over 2,000 members.[8] Osborne's primary responsibility there was to lead what we might today call the youth and children's ministry. At first, it appears that he had some participation in the leadership of the Sunday service as both he and Florence joined the senior choir.[9] However, after a few months, it is apparent that Osborne was not participating in the congregational worship at all, but rather leading the simultaneous worship of the "Junior Congregation" in the chapel.[10] In part, this would have suited him. It allowed him to teach "studies in the appreciation of religious pictures, the

[6] United Church of Canada Archives, 82.209c, box 26, Committee on the Hymn Book for Youth minutes, September 1937.

[7] *Record of Proceedings*, 8th General Council (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1938), 20.

[8] Timothy Eaton Memorial Church Archives, Box 1-21, "Annual Reports 1911–1949," *1938 Annual Report*, 6.

[9] *1938 Annual Report*, 43.

[10] Timothy Eaton Memorial Church Archives, Box 5-14, "Church Calendars," 19 March 1939.

interpretation and singing of hymns, the meaning of worship and the construction of prayers."[11] Essentially, the weekly structure of the Sunday morning children's ministry involved a period of preparing an order of worship followed by its enactment.[12] Osborne also introduced a Junior Choir into the weekly chapel service.[13] Showing an enthusiasm for "boys work," as he did throughout his ministry, Osborne also initiated a Trail Ranger Camp program for boys aged 11–14 who were not otherwise involved in a midweek activity. While the educational aspect of Osborne's role at Timothy Eaton was fitting, it must have been limiting overall. This much is noted in a letter of appreciation which accompanied a parting gift from the congregation which reads, "It is the earnest wish of the Officials and friends with whom you have been associated that you may find an ever-increasing sphere of influence, and the means of turning to good account the talents and abilities with which you have been endowed."[14]

In early summer 1941, Osborne was called to First United Church, Port Credit. During his seven years there, his leadership initiatives were reflective of his longer-term ministry interests. He was keen to promote evangelism and encouraged the United Church's Crusade for Christ and His Kingdom visitation campaign. It was likely frustrating for him that this did not generate enthusiasm or even consensus among congregational leaders.[15] He was heavily involved in boys' work, leading a Trail Ranger Camp; he chaired a committee which initiated a campaign for the renovation and enlargement of the sanctuary; and he took an active part in broadening the congregation's musical program.[16] He was also highly involved in the Temperence Movement, especially as its supporters fought to keep Peel County "dry" in the late 1940s. Several months in advance of a June 1947 referendum in the county on whether to repeal the Canada Temperance Act, the Official Board freed Osborne to dedicate as much time as necessary for campaigning in his role as Executive Secretary of the Peel County Temperence Federation.[17] It was also during his time in Port

[11] *1938 Annual Report*, 32–34.
[12] *1940 Annual Report*, 34.
[13] *1939 Annual Report*, 39.
[14] Timothy Eaton Memorial Church Archives, box 4-21, "Assistant and Associate Ministers," W.B. Sparling *et al*. to Stanley L. Osborne, 29 May 1941.
[15] United Church of Canada Archives, 2004.004L, box 10, file 2, "First United Session Minutes 1926–1949," 26 March 1946.
[16] United Church of Canada Archives, 2004.004L, box 21, file 9, "First United Church: A History 1825–1975," typescript, 5–10.
[17] United Church of Canada Archives, 2004.004L, box 12, file 6, "Official Board Minutes 1945–1964," 25 November 1946.

Credit that he earned his D.Mus. degree for a cantata, *Salvator Mundi*, composed under the supervision of Healey Willan.

Ontario Ladies College

In the summer of 1948 Osborne left Port Credit to become Principal of the Ontario Ladies College, an all-girls United Church secondary school in Whitby (now Trafalgar Castle School), where he stayed for twenty years. During his tenure, the student body ranged from one hundred to one hundred-fifty resident students and up to two dozen day students. When Osborne arrived, the school was financed in part by a farming operation on its large property. As Whitby's boundary began stretching toward the school grounds, and beyond, in the 1950s, much of the land was parceled into individual building lots and sold for housing—although the scale of the school's property remains impressive today. In 1956, Osborne achieved one of his goals for the College when Grace Chapel was completed.[18] A beautiful stone chapel in the gothic style, Osborne had its interior modeled on Healey Willan's Church of St. Mary Magdalene, Toronto, with the organ and choir located in a loft at the rear of the congregation.

Osborne's primary responsibilities at the College were administration, leadership, fundraising, and advocacy within the wider United Church. When he was in the classroom, it was primarily to teach German, a subject in which he was self-taught and yet highly proficient. He was very studious, often retiring to his study after supper for several hours of research or writing in the evening.[19] The Whitby years were fruitful ones for Florence Osborne as well. Though she had left school after grade 8, she was a strikingly intelligent and competent woman. Over their two decades there, she served as a fill-in for almost every job at the College at one time or another. This was a place where she could stretch her wings. The Osbornes were generous, often inviting ministers from Whitby and Oshawa, and their families, to enjoy the College's swimming pool on weekends or during school breaks.[20]

Institute of Church Music

Osborne was appointed to the General Council's Committee on Church Worship and Ritual in 1938 and served for almost thirty years. The minute book reveals that his main contributions were in the area of musical matters. With the *imprimatur* of the committee, he published a book of

[18] *Vox Collegii 1957* (Whitby, Ontario: Ontario Ladies College, 1957), 14–21.
[19] Personal interview with Marilyn Hunt, 1 November 2022.
[20] Personal interview with Richard Moffat, 3 October 2022.

simple anthems for use by small choirs (*Music for Worship*).[21] From 1957 to 1959 he edited a magazine for organists and choirmasters, *Jubilate Deo*. Of greater significance is Osborne's role in the creation of church music "schools" for organists, choirmasters, and ministers. In 1951, the General Council's Commission on Culture recommended that the Committee on Church Worship and Ritual sponsor "schools of church music" for the continuing education and development of church musicians. Kenneth Cousland, then Chair, asked Osborne to plan and execute an event on behalf of the Committee.[22] The first such School of Church Music was held the week after Christmas 1951 and the second was held April 6–9 (Easter week), 1953. The earliest events were hosted at the Ontario Ladies College.[23] Soon, however, the events moved around to different regions, mostly in Ontario. By 1956, there had been Schools of Church Music held in such centres as Toronto, North Bay, and Napanee.[24] Events were later offered in Saskatoon and Winnipeg. The curriculum for the schools was based, especially in the earlier iterations, on the United Church's *The Hymnary* and *Book of Common Order*, with emphasis on the selection of choir anthems.[25] Eventually, these events came to be known as Institutes of Church Music.[26] In 1970, after Osborne had retired and his work on *The Hymn Book* was slowing, he founded the (Summer) Institute of Church Music and remained its director until 1974 and then, until his death, honorary director.[27] This organization has continued successfully to the present day, meeting at Trafalgar Castle School and other locations in

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[21] United Church of Canada Archives, 82.209c, Committee on Church Worship and Ritual fonds, box 1, volume 3, "The Minutes," 19 Feb 1948.

[22] Committee on Church Worship and Ritual fonds, box 1, volume 3, "The Minutes," 5 April 1951. Kenneth Cousland of Emmanuel College and David Ouchterlony of Timothy Eaton Memorial Church also provided leadership.

[23] *Record of Proceedings*, 15th General Council (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1952), 193 and *The United Church Observer*, 1 April 1953, 39

[24] Committee on Church Worship and Ritual fonds, box 1, volume 3, "The Minutes," 29 November 1956.

[25] *Record of Proceedings*, 16th General Council (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1954), 247.

[26] Committee on Church Worship and Ritual fonds, box 1, volume 3, "The Minutes," 24 September 1962. On at least one occasion, an event was held in the U.S.A. at Alfred University in New York. See letter from Stanley L. Osborne to John Webster Grant 18 July 1967, United Church of Canada Archives 85.046c, Joint Committee for the Preparation of the Hymnal, "Correspondence of the Secretary," Box 2, file 1 "G".

[27] Inkster, "Legacy," 7.

Whitby. In recent years, the program has expanded to include a branch in Edmonton and an online learning presence.[28]

The Hymn Book

In the 1950s there were growing calls in the United Church for a revision of *The Hymnary*. In 1962, the Twentieth General Council asked the Committee on Church Worship and Ritual to undertake this task and in early 1963, a "Sub-Committee on the Revision of the Hymnary" was formed."[29] At the initial meeting of this sub-committee in February 1963, Osborne was appointed Secretary. In typical United Church-fashion, an early vision for this newly imagined hymnal was the possibility that it might become an ecumenical venture, involving other Canadian churches. Though there was some early interest from the Presbyterian Church in Canada, it was ultimately only the Anglicans who were committed.[30] Preliminary conversations between the two churches about a possible union confirmed the wisdom of pursuing a joint hymnal.[31] The first meeting of this new Joint Committee for the Preparation of the Hymnal took place in November 1965. In June 1966, Osborne was appointed its Secretary.[32]

There is more available evidence for Osborne's work on *The Hymn Book* than for all other parts of his life in sum. His secretarial correspondence alone takes up several archival boxes. In fact, he retired early from the Ontario Ladies College in 1968 to work full-time on *The Hymn Book*. His tasks included taking the minutes of meetings, corresponding with many parties—committee members, church folk, hymn writers, musicians, hymnologists, publishers, copyright holders, and more—and coordinating the publishing of the volume in an editorial capacity.

In late January and early February 1971, the United and Anglican Churches hosted joint General Council-General Synod meetings in Niagara Falls to consider the latest on their proposed union and, among other matters, *The Hymn Book*. On 30 January 1971, *The Hymn Book* was presented by Bishop Wilkinson, Chair of the Joint Committee. After

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[28] http://www.sicm.ca/about/ accessed 7 December 2023.

[29] Thomas Harding and Bruce Harding, *Patterns of Worship in The United Church of Canada 1925–1987* (Toronto: Evensong, 1996), 168–169.

[30] Stanley L. Osborne, *If Such Holy Song: The Story of the Hymns in The Hymn Book 1971* (Whitby, ON: The Institute of Church Music, 1976), xi.

[31] Harding and Harding, *Patterns*, 171.

[32] Osborne, *If Such Holy Song*, xi.

further comment and discussion, "Rev. Stanley Osborne led the joint session in the singing of a number of hymns from the new Hymn Book."[33] This was surely a momentous day in Osborne's life. As he later wrote to a friend, "Really, it was a great day when the book was accepted. That was one thing—but to think that we got a standing ovation was completely overwhelming!"[34]

Despite the satisfaction and euphoria which accompanied *The Hymn Book*'s approval, it proved to be a controversial volume. Some changes were made before a second printing due to strong disagreements within the Joint Committee. Complaints from the membership of the two churches were commonly associated with the book's cost, weight, and font.[35] Thomas and Bruce Harding describe concerns about unfamiliar music and a lack of "old favourite" gospel hymns, directing criticism especially at Osborne.[36] William S. Kervin notes the "common criticism of the 1971 *Hymn Book*" that it did not include many of the gospel hymns which had been in *The Hymnary* but which were "recovered" in *Voices United* (1996) as well as unspecified "acknowledged shortcomings."[37] Catherine Faith MacLean is more charitable, suggesting that the rapidity of cultural change in the 1960s and 1970s, inside and outside the church, put the producers of *The Hymn Book* between a rock and a hard place.[38]

While it is fair to conclude that if Stanley Osborne is due "credit" for *The Hymn Book*, therefore he should also be liable for any criticism, these polarities do not take into account that he was merely one member of a committee. He wrote to Hugh McLean, "I am in the position of a middleman, Hugh; not everyone on the committee thinks alike, and I certainly will not force my wishes on the committee. Ours may not be the book that you would design, nor I, nor any other person—but I do believe

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[33] *Record of Proceedings*, 24th General Council (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1971), 53–54.

[34] Stanley L. Osborne to R.G. Oliver, 19 February 1971, United Church of Canada Archives 85.046c, Joint Committee for the Preparation of the Hymnal, "Correspondence of the Secretary," box 4, file 3 "O".

[35] Osborne, *If Such Holy Song*, xiii.

[36] Harding and Harding, *Patterns*, 195–201.

[37] William S. Kervin, "Worship on the Way: The Dialectic of United Church Worship," in *The United Church of Canada: A History*, ed. Don Schweitzer (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), 193, 196.

[38] Catherine Faith MacLean, "The Triune God," in *The Theology of The United Church of Canada*, ed. Don Schweitzer *et al*. (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2019), 34.

it will be a wonderful advance on any other hymn book."[39] A hurtful disagreement about the publication of a companion to *The Hymn Book* led Osborne to resign abruptly at the late stage of October 1974.[40] He eventually self-published the companion volume, *If Such Holy Song*, under the Institute of Church Music banner in 1976. Perhaps most telling is another work, also published by the Institute of Church Music, *On Singing and Playing the Hymns in The Hymn Book: A Guide to Performance*, in several volumes from 1980–1985. There, Osborne delivers frank, often critical assessments of the texts and tunes in *The Hymn Book*. For many tunes he offers one or more alternative arrangements, implicitly refuting a common critique. He felt free to disregard what he considered to be poor and to revise what he thought could be improved, thereby modeling his view of the book as a *tool* to enable the best worship of which God's people could be capable. Osborne led a long and productive life, and died at Oshawa, Ontario on December 7, 2000.

Conclusion

In considering the legacy of his friend, Stanley Osborne, Kenneth Inkster notes the influence of Augustine (354–430), who wrote that when the soul turns its focus away from the body and towards God, it "progresses and furnishes its servant [the body] a very easy life . . . no attention being given it in its surpassing peace."[41] The inherent musicality of creation, for Augustine, can be an important medium for our communion with God. Osborne articulates a similar perspective but in a clearer, more modern idiom. "The primary purpose of worship," he writes, "is to adore God and to make an offering to Him. A reciprocal movement takes place. The movement from God to man is answered by a movement from man to God…we listen to God's Word and we respond in praise."[42] While "fundamentally music has no moral bearing," and "that there is no absolute necessity for the use of music at all in worship," music does have the capacity to lift our emotions, to convey "goodness and beauty," "to enkindle the meaning of words," and to unite people. "Pure music then,

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[39] Stanley L. Osborne to Hugh McLean 26 October 1970, United Church of Canada Archives 85.046c, Joint Committee for the Preparation of the Hymnal, "Correspondence of the Secretary," box 3, file 7 "Mc".

[40] United Church of Canada Archives 93.094c, Printing and Publishing Committee Minutes, box 1, file 1, 31 October 1974.

[41] Augustine, *On Music*, trans. Robert Catesby Taliaferro (Annapolis, MD: St. John's Bookstore, 1939), 337.

[42] Stanley L. Osborne, *The Strain of Praise* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1957), 1.

can move one to devotion and transform every room into a place of worship."[43]

Osborne's thinking about Christian worship, and of the role of music within it, is very helpful. What is more remarkable perhaps is the consistency with which Osborne sought to live his life in accordance with his theological vision. As Inkster notes, "Dr. Osborne, during worship, would not sing a stanza of a hymn that did not address God, Jesus Christ, or the Holy Spirit."[44] This lived-theology is Osborne's legacy. It is also the key to understanding his life and ministry.

[43] Osborne, *The Strain of Praise*, 2–11.
[44] Inkster, "Legacy," 7.

Grace and Law in Galatians. Justification in Luther and Calvin
By Dennis Ngien. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 023. Pp. xvi +178.

Martin Luther and John Calvin might be long dead, but in this tome, Dennis Ngien resurrects their reading of the book of Galatians. He does so by igniting the reader's interest in key Reformation theological themes, particularly their understanding of justification and the relationship between law and grace in Paul's letter to Galatia. However, his overview is not limited to those key themes. He takes the reader into the heart of the gospel and looks at love, grace, the Trinity and the central place of the *theologia crucis* in God's economy.

As a preacher, I found this book to be profoundly helpful as Ngien brings the gospel to life. Our current age produces a plethora of books that analyze the church sociologically and emphasises technique or predicts the cultural demise of the church in a post-colonial world and does so through the lens of the *fides qua creditur* (faith by which we believe). While these are helpful on a certain level, this book offers a positive doctrinal insight into the central core of the Christian message – the *fides quae creditur* (faith which is believed, i.e. the content of faith). Although he examines the Reformers within their own contexts, he suggests there are profound lessons for our times as well. The implications and applications of their theological insights are helpful, and as Christopher Holmes (an endorsee of the book cover) suggests, the book stresses that, "The gospel enables us to live in Christ and in the neighbour."

Ngien is also refreshing in this interpretation of the Reformers, and the book is full of quotable phrases and engaging images. In quoting Martin Luther, for example, he writes, "We cannot create our own righteousness but receive it from God, just as the earth cannot produce rain, but receives it from above" (18). Such an image is a gift for preachers as it captures the imagination. Theologically, it is also a phrase that corrects the excessive Pelagianism (the belief that people can attain righteousness through their own efforts, not through God's grace) that is a characteristic of much twenty-first century homiletics.

The book also illustrates the fact that while steeped in Scripture, the Reformers were also informed by the early church writers, such as St. Augustine. Again, while referring to Luther's theology, Ngien reminds us that, "In Augustine the suffering of Christ is both a sacrament and an example because it signifies the death of sin in us…and is an example because it behooves us to imitate Him in bodily suffering and dying" (66). I found this view most helpful. Much of our age stresses the need to imitate

Christ and follow Him in a discipleship that is grounded in Christ-like action. What is often lost in homiletics today, however, is the sacramental nature of Christ's death *pro me* (for me). If this is not preached, then why follow Jesus Christ at all?

The author also recognizes that Calvin and Luther differ at times in their theological interpretation of Galatians. For example, in looking at Galatians 2:16, he points out that Luther uses the phrase "faith in Christ", while Calvin utilizes the phrase, "the faith of Jesus Christ". The recognition of this distinction is fascinating, for there is a great deal of theological discussion today as to which should be our primary focus.

In conclusion, in an age of excessive introspection as we experience a plague of narcissism, Ngien reminds us that the gospel is essentially *pro nobis* (for others). He believes that Jesus Christ renews us all and that, "We are most truly ourselves when we have Christ as Lord." (162) What a refreshing perspective this is when our world today is caught up in the web of self-deception and self-aggrandizement. Ngien goes on to say, "The Christian life is one of paradox: we must die by the annihilating power of the Law in order to live by the animating power of the gospel" (162). Coming from an erudite scholar and sincere Christian, this is a salient reminder to all preachers and believers of what lies at the heart of the faith.

The author's hope for the book is that, "Readers will learn from the Reformers how they apply a text or theological theme homiletically in a pastoral context and appreciate how their understanding of the gospel can shape and nurture the life of faith" (3). In my reading, Ngien has been successful in that goal.

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Theology without Deception: God, the Poor, and Reality in El Salvador. **By Jon Sobrino. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023. Pp. xi + 225.**

Jon Sobrino is a theologian at the University of Central America (UCA) in San Salvador, known for his contributions to liberation theology, particularly in the area of Christology. Now in his mid-80s, he was the only member of his Jesuit community at UCA who wasn't killed in 1989 when government forces executed his six Jesuit colleagues and a cook and her

daughter. This book is written as his answers to a series of questions posed by Charo Mármol, who contributed a "Prologue."

The author begins by introducing himself, discussing his upbringing in Spain, joining the Jesuits, studying in the United States, his crisis of faith there, and how he came to El Salvador. He discusses his doctoral studies in Germany and the impact Karl Rahner's theology had on him. The second chapter describes how after returning to El Salvador in 1974, he experienced two irruptions there that led him to understand Jesus in a new way. The first was the irruption of the poor, who were brutally repressed. The second was the irruption of the martyrs who defended them. In this terrible time Sobrino's doubts about the existence of God diminished, partly because these two irruptions shed new light on the gospel. Jesus became for Sobrino someone who must be followed, who made great demands but also promised a very real salvation. The third chapter discusses the assassination in 1977 of Rutilio Grande, a Jesuit priest working with the poor. Grande's death affected the whole country, for it transformed Archbishop Romero into a radical defender of the poor. Prior to this, through the leadership of Ignacio Ellacuría, Sobrino and his UCA colleagues had dedicated their scholarship to the service of the poor of El Salvador. As Romero became a courageous prophet speaking against the oppression of the poor, the UCA gave him unqualified support. This brought persecution on the UCA. Sobrino discusses how Romero, Ellacuría and the plight of the poor influenced his teaching and gives a lengthy discussion of Ellacuría's person and work. Romero's assassination galvanized Ellacuria to further this work. This led to the 1989 massacre.

Sobrino also discusses the person and work of Father Arrupe, who as superior general of the Jesuits from 1965-83, turned the order toward a focus on justice and peace. Sobrino notes that this led to the martyrdom of dozens of Jesuits for their faith. Sobrino movingly describes how the deaths of these martyrs was a great crime and loss, yet also a great gain for the Jesuit order. In a time when the poor are being persecuted and killed, the deaths of these martyrs in defending them was a sign of the orders' integrity in following Jesus. Sobrino writes that the witness of martyrs like Rutilio Grande and Oscar Romero made God present in a new way.

The fourth chapter looks at four key themes for Sobrino. The first is the crucified people; the poor who have everything taken from them, including their dignity, and who live with no defence against their oppression. Sobrino likens them to the suffering servant of Isaiah. They reveal the truth of civilization. Christ identified with them. The second theme is Jesus himself. For Sobrino, attention to how Jesus located himself amidst the social conflicts of his time is essential to preventing Christ from

becoming a vague, abstract figure. This Jesus must be followed in the conflicts of the present. Following from this comes a third theme, to be a church of the poor. The fourth theme is the creation of a civilization of poverty, as opposed to the present civilization which idolizes wealth. The fifth chapter discusses the person and significance of Monseigneur Romero and Pope Francis. Chapter six discusses the legacy of the UCA martyrs. Here Sobrino describes how he learned of their deaths while teaching in Thailand and how their memory has impacted him. The book closes with an "epilogue" discussing the importance of following in the footsteps of Romero, Ellacuria and Jesus. Appended at the end are four key documents from Sobrino's time in El Salvador.

This is an important book for clergy, theologians and educated lay people. As a Canadian theologian I am challenged by it to do theology as a vocation, in the service of the crucified and risen Christ, in pursuit of the coming reign of God while listening to the voices of the poor, rather than as a career in pursuit of academic honours. Every seminary library should have it.

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***Jesus and Elvis: Creative Resources for Schools and Churches*, 2nd edition.**

By John McTavish (ed.). Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2020. pp. 158

In another fine volume from John McTavish, we are offered a bevy of selected resources that are meant to enrich faith, strengthen human relations, and enhance worship experiences. From poetry to music to essays and plays, McTavish has gathered many of his favourite pieces. They are drawn from writings by famous authors; by his family members, friends, and colleagues; and by McTavish himself.

Sections 1 and 2 (Poems and Plays) collect pieces new and old, many of which have deep resonance for people of faith. Classics such as "The Creation" by James Weldon Johnson and "Who Am I?" by Dietrich Bonhoeffer are stirring poems that draw the reader deeply into substantial theological reflection. New pieces such as "A Valedictory Address to Little People" (by McTavish's daughter, Sandra), bring fresh images and ideas.

Among fourteen dramatic selections, McTavish reprints or describes full scripts from Canadian, American, and British authors, alongside commentary on each. A low point here is the play about Martin Luther King Jr. It would be problematic to stage this play today, given its unnuanced and uninterpreted use of the offensive "N-word" and other racial slurs. Section 7 later offers another four dramatic readings, including a delightful Advent sequence that reads like a Dr. Seuss book. Music and Hymns are featured in sections 3 and 4. New liturgical music (e.g. *a Gloria Patri*) is paired with commentary on several excellent hymns. McTavish also provides insightful notes on acoustics and the presentation of music.

The last sections (Prayers, Communion, and Essays) are the brightest gold in this collection. A range of prayer resources, written by Judith Brocklehurst and Harold Wells, from Opening Prayers to a graveside lamentation, are rich in imagery and theological meaning, as is the communion liturgy written by Paul Scott Wilson. The six concluding short essays are especially satisfying in their contemplation of death and the "last things." Former United Church Moderator Bruce McLeod's reflection on the accidental death of his grandson is especially moving and profound.

Readers of *Jesus and Elvis* will find inspiration, wit, irony, paradox, pathos, grit, and faith in this collection. Although McTavish names no single intended theme, the collection is unified by its witness to the grace of God. Some pieces will work well in worship settings, and others will serve the mind and spirit better than the liturgy. It is harder to imagine them being used in present-day multireligious and secular school settings, despite the book's subtitle. Nevertheless, the range and variety of materials John McTavish has skilfully edited is a rewarding read no matter their final audience, whether private or public.

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Postcolonial Preaching: Creating a Ripple Effect
By HyeRan Kim-Cragg. New York: Lexington Books, 2021. Pp. 160

This book offers an excellent homiletic practical methodology that can be employed by all preachers. HyeRan Kim-Cragg's method for postcolonial sermoncraft follows the acronym RIPPLE, which stands for

"Rehearsal," "Imagination," "Place," "Pattern," "Language," and "Exegesis." While this method doesn't necessarily follow a linear progression, a "sola-scriptura" Protestant may very well object to the place of scriptural exegesis as the final step in the methodological process. The critical processes involved in the stages of Kim-Cragg's method act as a preparation for the work of exegesis in the first place. One must do the work understanding their situation in the colonized world in relation to the colonized Other in order to approach the text in a manner that is life-giving for preaching to one's congregation.

This book is an important resource in very uncertain times. The author wrote it during the protests in 2020 in response to the murder of George Floyd. The Church must face the legacy of intersections of race/class/gender/sexual orientation and the legacy of colonialism. It is a monumental task that requires constructive solutions, not simply a theoretical or deconstructive approach. *Postcolonial Preaching* offers a highly practical and constructive methodology for preaching to a congregation, as well as many "points of departure" (to use existentialist terminology) for further studies into any number of important fields of relevant inquiry. In like manner, the power of this discursive work is that it acts as its own point of departure for further discourse in homiletics, taking so many intersectional theories and frameworks into account for further practical and constructive work. The inclusion of sermons at the end of each chapter that exemplify the specific element of the RIPPLE method further lends practical and constructive value to Kim-Cragg's work.

There seems to be a dichotomy between Christians who focus on tradition within the Church (such as Scripture, liturgy, and sacrament) and those who focus on social justice to the world outside the Church. Without looking at this book, there are many who will assume that any work of postcolonial theory is anti-Christian, even if it comes from within the Church. However, there is no doubt that *Postcolonial Preaching* is written from a place fully integrated within the Church that is liturgical, sacramental, scriptural, and oriented towards the Good News (which can be termed "evangelical"). Thus, I would hope that conservative Christians would be able to read this work, especially if they are from a racialized community or generally engaged in Church life in the post-colonized world (which also includes missionary work). While Christianity seems to be on the wane in North America and Western Europe, it is also on the rise in the problematically so-called "Global South." This radical change in

Church demographics also heralds a change in Church leadership, which makes postcolonial discourse increasingly necessary for the future life of the Church.

As one who is philosophically oriented towards phenomenology and hermeneutics, as well as the role of preaching in liturgy and sacrament, I find a great deal of material with which to engage in *Postcolonial Preaching*. At the same time, this book challenges me to engage further in intersectional discourses in the spirit of engagement between global Christian communities. I look forward to increasingly make use of the RIPPLE method in my own life and work.

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