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These Ancient Words: Preaching so the Bible Can Speak

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Abstract

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The reality of preaching today is that many - if not most - of our listeners will only encounter the Bible in the preaching moment. Some will come with curiosity, some with skepticism, and some with wounds inflicted by the text. How, then, should we as preachers approach the ancient words of scripture so that they can speak with new life? This paper suggests a framework for preachers that moves beyond biblical preaching and beyond biblical literacy toward a call for preaching from and within the biblical narrative. To do so faithfully requires five tasks of the preacher: to be convicted, to be a teacher, to be a poet, to be a host, and to be a guide who points us toward the way of God.

These Ancient Words: Preaching so the Bible Can Speak

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A Final Project submitted to the Faculty of the
Candler School of Theology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry
2024

Loving the Scriptures in Public: Introduction

“What if our job as preachers is to just love the scriptures in public?”

~ Lauren Winner¹

I remember the first time I fell in love with the Bible. It was a New Testament class in my sophomore year of college, and I was using a red Oxford Annotated Bible I’d borrowed from my dad. I wasn’t new to the Bible by any means; I’m the kind of pastor’s kid who mostly loved church, and I’d grown up going to Sunday school and Vacation Bible School and church camp. I knew the stories. But when that New Testament professor explained that there was a way of reading Matthew’s gospel in which we could see John the Baptist and Jesus as a new version of Elisha and Elijah, I was smitten. I scribbled questions in the margins and underlined words in the text. This book, these stories, were so much richer than I had known. It would be several more years before I stepped into a pulpit myself, but that class sparked something in me that I haven’t been able to let go of since.

When I hear good preaching – and every once in a blessed while when the Spirit moves in just the right way and gives me the ability to do it myself – I find myself in awe of what God can do. The words of scripture weave their way out of the tissue-thin pages of the pew Bible and into the stories of our lives, and I am amazed that words so old have been carried down to us. When those ancient words come to life and speak to us, I am smitten all over again.

I fear that we don’t know how to help people fall in love with the Bible. I wonder how many people come to church, or watch online, and the only time they ever hear the words of

¹ Lauren Winner, quoted by Emmy Kegler in “Bruised and Blessed,” *Christian Century*, March 27, 2019, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/bruised-and-blessed-scripture>.

scripture is when the preacher steps into the pulpit. I wonder how many people leave worship mildly inspired by the preacher's call to action but unconvinced that the church has anything to offer that's better than the memes in their social media feeds. I wonder how many people think of the Bible as an outdated book of rules that does more harm than good. I wonder how many people don't know the Bible at all.

And sure, there are still those faithful church members who show up to every Bible study, who bring their Bible to church or at least have it installed as an app on their phone. There are those who pick up the monthly devotional in the church narthex and read it every morning with their first cup of coffee. Maybe some grew up like me, with Sunday school lessons and VBS crafts that taught them about Noah and Jonah and the feeding the five thousand. There are those in our pews who know the Bible better than we do.

But I am thinking of the others. I am thinking of the people who lost touch with the Bible long ago, or who know the stories simply because of the cultural waters we swim in, or who have never read the Bible before at all, or who have read it but were clobbered by it, and find themselves skeptical, or curious, or hurt, or angry, or hopeful, or confused. These, I venture to guess, are most of the people who listen to us preach. Our sermons are the only time they encounter the Bible, the only time in the week that they hear these ancient words.

How, then, should we preach? What actually happens in the preaching moment, and in the preparation, that allows the message of scripture to live and move among us? If we, as preachers, take this book to be our foundational text, how do we let these ancient words speak?

Eugene Peterson, in his preface to the Message, says his intent in writing was "simply to get people reading who don't know that the Bible is readable at all, at least by them, and to get

people who long ago lost interest in the Bible to read it again.”² I have similar intentions for this project: I hope to help preachers find ways to preach so that those who are listening, the ones who might not otherwise find their way to the pages of the Bible, might hear something worth paying attention to. I hope they might even fall in love.

To that end, I have identified five key tasks for the preacher to consider as she prepares her sermon. The preacher must first ***be convicted***. That is, she must be clear on how she understands the authority of scripture and trust that the text can and will speak to her congregation. The preacher should then ***be a teacher*** who understands that the scriptures often come to life more powerfully when we understand their history, context, and place in the canon. She must also ***be a poet*** – not one who preaches in rhyming verse, but one who thinks carefully and creatively about the language she chooses. She should ***be a host*** who invites people into the story and makes room especially for those whose voices have not always been heard. Finally, she must ***be a guide*** who points to the divine mystery, makes space for curiosity and questions, and shows us a glimpse of the new world we find when we follow the way of God.

Context

A word about my context: After serving in congregational ministry for almost 15 years, I transitioned into denominational leadership. I now serve in the Office of the General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as the Director of the Proclamation Project, a program to support and equip Disciples preachers which is part of the Lilly Endowment’s Compelling Preaching Initiative. In this role, I lead our efforts to create resources for preachers, host online and in-person seminars and retreats, coordinate peer groups, and offer

² Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 1993), 8.

other opportunities to support Disciples preachers. My location in Disciples leadership is significant to this project, because while I hope and believe that what I have articulated below will be helpful to preachers of all traditions, I have been writing with Disciples in mind. I've leaned heavily on the wisdom of Disciples preachers and scholars in addition to other homiletical scholarship. My primary research has been focused on sermons by Disciples, and my evaluation and feedback has been conducted in Disciples settings. And while it would certainly be hard to articulate only one approach Disciples have taken toward the Bible, I have tried to stay true to our tradition.

I will also note that I am a lifelong Disciple, raised in a family and educated in spaces where progressive Christianity was the norm. I was nurtured by mentors who saw the Bible as a collection of writings passed down over time, a complicated book of books full of hope and beauty and wisdom. Questions of literalism and infallibility were not issues we spent much time on; I have generally understood that the truth of what happened mattered more than whether it actually happened or not. That is to say, I have had to do very little deconstructing of my faith in order to approach the Bible the way I do now. I'm also a white, cisgender, heterosexual woman. With the exception of a few phrases I still know from my high school Spanish classes, I speak only English. I've been married for twenty years to a man I met on the first day of college. I'm a mom with a minivan that has earned many miles on the way to sports practices. We're firmly middle class, and while we are a tad bit anxious about the impending college tuition payments for our daughter who will graduate high school next year, the reality is that we live comfortably and want for very little. All of this inevitably affects how I read scriptures, how I preach, how I relate to the world around me, and how I approach the task of helping other preachers proclaim the good news. I have tried, as I've researched and written, to be mindful of my location and to

consider how my work will be received by those whose lives are different from mine, and I have tried to seek out wisdom from people whose experiences are different from my own.

Methods

I approached my project by gathering information through a variety of methods: viewing and analyzing contemporary sermons; reading scholarly work on homiletics and biblical preaching; informal conversations with my classmates and professors and other colleagues; and feedback from a presentation of this material in an earlier form. Let me say a few more words about each of these methods:

Because I wanted to focus my project on Disciples preaching, the sermons I watched and analyzed were all offered by Disciples preachers. While I don't necessarily think there is one unique way Disciples approach the Bible in preaching, there is a history and tradition of how we understand our relationship to scripture that is relevant here. I certainly could have found examples of strong preaching in other traditions as well, but this parameter allowed me to focus on a particular subset, and to draw on the wisdom of my own tradition. The sermons I selected to analyze were almost all available online, having been preached in a local congregation or other public event, primarily in the last year. I tried to select a subset of sermons that somewhat represent the diversity of our denomination, though there is certainly no way to do that thoroughly (and, it should be noted, I only analyzed sermons delivered in English; there is a growing number of Disciples who worship in Spanish, Korean, Chuukese, Tongan, and a variety of other languages. My own monolingualism imposed this limit). A few of the sermons I watched were preached by well-known Disciples preachers, but the majority were local pastors whose names would not necessarily be known beyond their own congregation. Because preaching is so

completely contextual, I primarily watched sermons from Sunday morning worship services in local congregations. I used a set of questions to analyze each sermon I watched, which gave me a framework to start from, though I also made note of how the preacher approached the text in general. (See the appendix for a list of questions and a list of sermons I watched.)

In addition to watching and analyzing sermons, I also consulted a number of scholarly texts about homiletics, especially those that dealt specifically with the use of scripture. For the most part, my scholarly conversation partners were written in the past 10-20 years. In the fall, as I was working on this project, I was invited to speak at a preaching conference hosted by the MidAmerican Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). This event gave me the opportunity to present this material in an early draft form, and my conversations with participants that day and afterward helped me shape and refine the framework I will present below. Finally, a key component of my learning has come through conversations with my classmates, both in and out of class, as well as professors and other colleagues. These discussions about the task of preaching in our time have been particularly helpful in this work.

The Light of Scripture: The Bible in Disciples Tradition

The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), which is the document that governs our denomination, begins with a Preamble that also serves as a sort of affirmation of faith for Disciples. Because we are a non-credal tradition – that is, we may find meaning in the creeds of the church but we do not use them as tests of faith – the Preamble serves as an articulation of who we are and how we understand ourselves as followers of Jesus. It reads, in part:

*At the Table of the Lord
we celebrate with thanksgiving
the saving acts and presence of Christ.
Within the universal church
we receive the gift of ministry
and the light of scripture.³*

It's a small turn of phrase – “the light of scripture” – but it is instructive in how Disciples have approached the Bible. Scripture is a gift received by the church, but the true gift is the light the scripture shines, making it possible for us to see the story of God's work in the world.

Eugene Boring's book *Disciples and the Bible* provides a look at how two of our most well-known founders, Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell, understood and used the Bible in their preaching and leadership. Boring explains that Stone – a Presbyterian preacher who presided at the Cane Ridge Revival in Kentucky in 1801, one of the key moments in the history of our movement – was asked during his ordination exam in 1798 if he accepted the Westminster Confession of Faith as “containing the system of doctrine taught in the Bible.” Stone responded, “I do, as far as I see it consistent with the word of God.” Boring writes, “Stone's answer, celebrated in Disciples tradition, affirms both creed and Bible, with the Bible the authority for interpreting the creed. But his answer is ambiguous in that it assumes there is no norm needed for interpreting the Bible.”⁴ Stone believed that scripture was clear and could be understood by anyone who approached it with common sense. That the Bible was the ultimate authority meant that anyone was free to interpret it.⁵

³ The Preamble to the Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), <https://disciples.org/our-identity/the-design/>.

⁴ M. Eugene Boring, *Disciples and the Bible: A History of Disciples Biblical Interpretation in North America* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1997), 17.

⁵ Boring, *Disciples and the Bible*, 19.

Alexander Campbell, a Scottish Presbyterian who had emigrated with his father Thomas and was working in Pennsylvania and West Virginia, also believed that the meaning of scripture could be made clear, but noted that there were certain principles of interpretation that allowed readers to “come within an understanding distance” of the text. If readers were taught how to interpret scripture, Campbell thought, then they would be able to understand its meaning. He outlined seven principles for interpretation, which would allow for the meaning of scripture to be revealed. These principles, Boring explains,

“represent a public, populist hermeneutic. It was the expression of Campbell's confidence in 'common sense' and the capacity of common people responsibly to interpret the Bible objectively, if they were given clear instruction on how to do so. Campbell wanted to wrest control of the interpretation of the Bible from the clergy and make it a 'public' function open to the common gaze and a process in which all Christians could participate... The Bible was like an object which could be studied empirically in the laboratory of open discussion; when people of goodwill agreed on a viable method, they could not do otherwise but agree on the meaning of the Bible. And in these seven rules we see another expression of Campbell's conviction of the plain meaning of scripture. He thought that once the necessary historical explanations were made and the vocabulary was clarified, the meaning of scripture was simply transparent and univocal.”⁶

This understanding from both Stone and Campbell that anyone could interpret the Bible has been formative for Disciples in many ways. It is consistent with our rejection of creeds as tests of faith, our emphasis on lay leadership, and our insistence on the priesthood of all believers. Disciples understand clergy to be set apart in some ways, but that they are not gatekeepers who hold the key to unlocking the meaning of scripture. We see this also in the work of our most famous preacher, Fred Craddock, who advocated for an inductive style of preaching in which preachers invite their hearers to consider their own experience as a way of leading to understanding of the scriptural text. In a series of 1981 lectures entitled “The Bible in the Pulpit of the Christian Church,” Craddock wrote,

⁶ Boring, *Disciples and the Bible*, 85-87.

“We have, as a people, always understood the responsibility of the church towards Scripture as threefold: the translation of scripture continuing always, because language is a living thing; the interpretation of scripture, so that those who read and hear can understand; and the appropriation of scripture in the life and faith and work of the church.”⁷

In those lectures, he continues:

“It is the task of preaching, therefore, to present the Scripture in its simplest, most obvious, most natural meaning, the self evident nature of it being such that even a child can grasp the message. Whenever preachers are willing to do this, in any and every audience it is possible to have a consensus of understanding.”⁸

I wonder if this is true in our current moment. Is it possible to have a consensus of understanding? Is Campbell’s notion of an “understanding distance” still an achievable goal? Was it ever? And is that really our task?

I’m not so sure.

Writing more recently, Disciples scholars Jan Lin and Michael Kinnamon, articulate an approach that makes more sense to me for our time. They note that our covenant as a church “is not necessarily to agree on our interpretation of the Bible; our covenant is to read it together, to seek understanding of it together, as a community of faith. The goal of a covenantal people is not to win interpretive battles, but to stay at the table until fuller truth is discerned, until God’s claim on us all is strengthened. The Bible is not a club we use to beat up on ideological opponents; it is an authority to which we commonly appeal in our pursuit of deeper love and knowledge of God.”⁹ This approach to scriptural interpretation is not inconsistent with that of earlier articulations – there is still a commitment to a freedom of interpretation and an insistence that the

⁷ Fred B Craddock, “The Bible in the Pulpit of the Christian Church: The Forrest F Reed Lectures, 1981 (3 Lectures: Principles of Clarity, Harmony, Finality),” *Impact* (1982): 1-2.

⁸ Craddock, “The Bible in the Pulpit of the Christian Church,” 3.

⁹ Michael Kinnamon and Jan Linn, *Disciples: Who We Are & What Holds Us Together* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2019), 37.

Bible is accessible to all – but it offers a broader, more generous welcome and an understanding that better reflects who Disciples are today.

A 2018 collection of sermons from the Stone-Campbell movement observed that Disciples preaching in recent years is generally marked by "the theme of unity in diversity, the importance of the Table and the liturgical setting for preaching, and articulation of a hopeful social vision based on the realm of God."¹⁰ This was consistent with the contemporary sermons I watched and analyzed as well. More recently, too, Disciples have been coming to terms with the fact that our history has often been told through the lens of white, male leaders in the church (my own deference to Campbell, Stone, and Craddock above a case in point), despite the reality that Disciples have been a much more diverse movement from our very beginnings. Sandhya Jha's book *Room at the Table* offers a helpful introduction to the stories of Latino, Asian-American, and African-American Disciples which have often been left out of publications produced by the majority white church.¹¹ A 2022 conference hosted by the Disciples of Christ Historical Society focused on the history of racism within our denomination.¹² Contemporary Disciples scholars like Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder who approach the Bible with a Womanist lens help us understand that there is more than one way to understand the text.¹³ Frank Thomas's focus on African-American preaching highlights the long and powerful tradition of homiletics in the Black church.¹⁴

¹⁰ Casey Sigmon and Richard Voelz, "Orientation to Preaching in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), 1968-2018," in *The Living Pulpit: Sermons That Illustrate Preaching in the Stone-Campbell Movement 1968-2018*, ed Mary Alice Mulligan (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press 2018), 196.

¹¹ Sandhya R. Jha, *Room at the Table: Struggle for Unity and Equality in Disciples History*, (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2009).

¹² Disciples of Christ Historical Society Kirkpatrick Lecture: *Visions of Wholeness: Systemic Racism, Antiracism, and 'Reconciliation' In Our Shared History and Tradition*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, March 18-19, 2022.

¹³ Stephanie R. Buckhanon Crowder, *When Momma Speaks : the Bible and Motherhood from a Womanist Perspective*, (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Frank A. Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: the Role of Celebration in Preaching* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2013).

We have been given the light of scripture, and it is a gift for all to see. As we step into the pulpit and prepare to proclaim the good news, we will do well to remember that our task is not to unearth the meaning of scripture. It is to help our listeners to find their place in the grand story of God's love for the world.

The Whole Story of God: Why This Matters

In the last few weeks of March 2020, as the world began shutting down in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic and we all took shelter in our homes, something remarkable happened in churches. I was serving in an administrative role in my denomination at the time and was therefore able to observe without the pressure of figuring out how to stream a recorded service or what to do about virtual communion. What I noticed was this: not one of the pastors I know decided not to have worship at all. None of the churches I follow opted to just not do anything on Sunday morning. They could have done that: all bets were off and everything was in chaos. The world had turned upside down almost overnight. But faithful church members and tired pastors figured out how to do it. They set up Zoom accounts. They rigged up their cell phones on makeshift tripods. They recorded and re-recorded and learned how to live stream. Certainly there would be shifts in the months and years to come; already struggling churches would close, burned out pastors would resign. But in the deep wilderness of those early pandemic days, preachers did what they do best: they preached.

Those of us who are called to serve the church believe that there is something the church has to offer that the world needs to hear. We find that message in the Bible, in all its messy contradictions. The writings and stories of the scriptures are the foundational texts of our faith.

The words of scripture are what inspire us and give us words to preach our way through when we find ourselves in wilderness times. It is imperative that we, as preachers, understand how we approach the biblical narrative, know how it forms and informs us, and think carefully about how we use the witness of the Bible in our preaching. This is all the more important when we consider the reality that many of our listeners will only encounter the Bible in the sermon moment. If we are truly convinced that the way of God found in the Bible is the way of hope and peace, how do we tell this story to a world that does not know it?

Beyond “Biblical Preaching”

Before going much farther, it’s worth noting that what I am trying to articulate here is something different than what is often referred to as “biblical preaching.” I have tried, in fact, to avoid using that term, because I am aware that it has a particular connotation. “Are you a biblical preacher?” someone who was trying to suss out my credentials might ask. “Do you preach the Bible?” “Of course,” I would respond, but I would suspect – based (fairly or unfairly) solely on the phrasing – that he would not approve of the way I approach the Bible.

Consider the way Haddon W. Robinson, whose book *Biblical Preaching* was first published in 1980 and remains a mainstay in homiletics scholarship, writes about preaching:

"Ministers can proclaim anything in a stained-glass voice at 11:30 on Sunday morning following the singing of hymns. Yet when they fail to preach the Scriptures, they abandon their authority. No longer do they confront their hearers with a word from God. That is why most modern preaching evokes little more than a wide yawn. God is not in it.

God speaks through the Bible. It is the major tool of communication by which he addresses individuals today. Biblical preaching, therefore, must not be equated with ‘the old, old story of Jesus and his love’ as though it were retelling history about better times when God was alive and well. Nor is preaching merely a rehash of ideas about God - orthodox, but removed from life. Through the preaching of the Scriptures, God encounters men and women to bring them to salvation (2 Tim. 3:15) and to richness and

ripeness of Christian character (vs. 16-17). Something fills us with awe when God confronts individuals through preaching and seizes them by the soul."¹⁵

I don't explicitly disagree with anything Robinson says here, although my theology insists that scripture leads us not only to individual salvation but a redemption of the whole world and an inbreaking of the kingdom of God, but that's a topic for another paper. And yet, it is obvious that he comes at this with the expectation that if only the preacher will preach well enough, the biblical message will be clear. For Robinson and others who claim to "preach from the Bible," it seems that the text can only lead us to one meaning, one outcome. We need only look to some of the great arguments of Christendom to see that this can't possibly be the case. Take the recent fights over homosexuality: One preacher says gay marriage is clearly a sin and against the way of Christ. Another affirms love in all its forms and claims that God rejoices when love abounds. Both preachers would claim that they are preaching from the Bible.

What I am suggesting, then, goes beyond biblical preaching. I am proposing that we take a more expansive approach to the scriptural text, one that allows us to claim the authority of the Bible while finding our place in its story. "The Bible isn't really at all good at being an instructional manual," writes pastor Debbie Blue. "It's good at leading us into a tangle of wild poetry, heartbreaking stories, contradictions, twists and turns, the concrete struggles of a vast array of unruly, disparate humans being sought after by God."¹⁶ Our call is to preach so that the Bible can speak – in all its varied, complicated, and contradictory ways – about the love of God for the world.

¹⁵ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2001), 4.

¹⁶ Debbie Blue, *From Stone to Living Word: Letting the Bible Live Again*, (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2008), 35.

This call also leads us beyond a concern for biblical literacy. There is much handwringing in the church these days about the decline in attendance in worship, the demise of Sunday school and youth group programs, and low participation in Bible study classes. Certainly, I also grieve these losses as the church shifts and changes. But it is disingenuous and unhelpful to cling to a rosy memory of brighter days. Preaching in today's context requires us to do something more than simply ask people to read their Bibles.

Gail O'Day, in the first chapter of *Questions Preachers Ask*, considers a similar question to the one I am wrestling with in this project: "How do we reclaim the Bible in the pulpit for people who have little grounding in it or connections to it?"¹⁷ She then goes on to offer a helpful caution against framing this endeavor as "reclaiming" the Bible for preaching and helps us move beyond a simple call for biblical literacy. She notes that such a framing sets up church leaders to believe that not only is church attendance declining, but so is the work of the gospel. She writes:

"Such a general premise can become a worldview that sees decline in every kind of change. It can give an all-encompassing narrative shape to what may actually be discrete observations, underwriting a story in which people know less about the Bible than they did in 'the good old days.' That story becomes a real trap when preachers assume that the effectiveness of the proclamation of God's good news for the world hinges on the knowledge of the Bible that congregants bring with them to worship.

"A second potential trap is related to this first one. To posit that a significant role of the preacher is to reclaim the Bible in the pulpit assumes an extrinsic authority of scripture that the preacher must convey to a worshipping congregation. The pastoral contribution of preaching to the life of a worshipping community and the creative power of the individual preacher are severely constrained and limited by the assumption that a preacher cannot preach effectively if the congregation does not come to worship with 'grounding' in or prior connection to the Bible. Understood this way, preaching risks becoming primarily a transactional act of communication through which the preacher gives something to the congregation, and what the preacher has to give can be received

¹⁷ Gail O'Day, "Shaped by Hearing: Living Our Stories Together," in *Questions Preachers Ask: Essays in Honor of Thomas G. Long*, Scott Black Johnston, Ted A. Smith, and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, eds, (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2016), 3.

only if the congregation already knows something about what the preacher is giving them. In this understanding of preaching, the sermon reinforces preexisting and commonly held assumptions about content and sources of authority, and the congregation gathers to be reminded by the preacher of what they should already know about the Bible, a decidedly passive role for the hearers of the word.”¹⁸

O’Day’s cautions here remind us that we too often restrict God’s movements to the institutions, structures, and systems we have built, and when those crumble, we fear that God will crumble as well. Do we not think highly enough of God to trust that God can work through our preaching to reach even those who know very little of the Bible? Can we not imagine that we might preach in a such way that these ancient words might speak even to those who have never heard them before?

Likewise, when we put too much emphasis on the importance of biblical literacy, we are aiming at the wrong target. The rich young man who comes to Jesus in Mark 10 has studied the scriptures his whole life; that’s not enough for Jesus. Following Jesus demands more from us than simply reading the Bible. Knowing the scriptures was never the point. A transformed life, a redeemed world – that’s the point. “The duty of the preacher,” writes Teresa Fry Brown, “is to address the relevant needs of the listeners in ways that are grounded in the biblical text and the transforming message of Jesus and that expand to affirm the humanity of all persons.”¹⁹ Our goal, then, is not to produce biblically literate people. The goal is to help people find their place in the whole story of God.

¹⁸ O’Day, “Shaped by Hearing,” 3-4.

¹⁹ Teresa Fry Brown, “Prophetic Truth-Telling in a Season of Fatigue and Fragmentation,” in *Questions Preachers Ask: Essays in Honor of Thomas G. Long*, Scott Black Johnston, Ted A. Smith, and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, eds, (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2016), 129.

Toward Biblical Narrative

David Anderson Hooker, a scholar who has done significant work in the areas of storytelling and conflict resolution, has been working with groups within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) on what we are calling the Church Narrative Project. The hope of this project is to help our denomination articulate a vision of a preferred narrative of a shared future. That is, who are we called to be and what is our story as we move into the future together? Each gathering of the Church Narrative Project begins with a Story Hour, in which participants – some preachers, some not – tell first-person true stories about their lives. Hooker then leads the group through conversation and exercises that help move us closer toward a collective narrative that can include our individual stories. I’ve been using the words “story” and “narrative” interchangeably here, but Hooker notes that there is an important difference. Narrative, he contends, is like the highway interstate system; each of us, our individual stories, are the cars that zip down the road.²⁰ When we, as preachers, are able to move beyond a form of biblical preaching that insists on one clear meaning of a text, and beyond our focus on biblical literacy, we can find our way to preaching that helps our listeners place their own stories within the context of the biblical narrative of God’s great love for the world.

This is easier said than done, of course. Our listeners – and we preachers, too – live in a world of multiple, conflicting narratives. David Lose, in his discussion of preaching in a secular age, notes that “there is no longer any *single* story that can hold the field uncontested.”²¹ This is not, inherently, a bad thing: if we are remembering a time in our culture when the Christian narrative was the overriding narrative in which we lived, we are forgetting that such adherence to

²⁰ David Anderson Hooker (presentation, Church Narrative Project, Little Rock, AR, November 5, 2023).

²¹ David J. Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World—and Our Preaching—Is Changing* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 59.

a single story kept many people on the margins. We are coming to understand that there are many different, valid ways of experiencing the world. The dangerous rise of Christian Nationalism is one example of American Christians who are finding themselves unsteadied by multiple narratives and so cling desperately and violently to one.²² But Lose points out that “the greatest threat to the Christian story in this land” – here I would suggest that he is actually referring to narrative, at least in the way Hooker understands it – “is not a Jewish, Buddhist, or Islamic story, but rather the Western consumer-consumption story that denies any transcendent reality and therefore establishes worth on the basis of material possessions...”²³ He continues:

“[I]t becomes crucial for us to recognize Christianity as a story, an *alternative* story about a transcendent reality that also seeks to make sense of our immediate and material lives and experience. Preaching and worship, from this point of view, take on tremendous significance as the primary place where we tell that story and offer it to our people as something they can entertain, enact, and live into. In this sense, we are charged with telling and repeating the ancient story again and anew, that its transcendent claims might become seriously imaginable for those who gather in the assembly and lead their lives in the secular world.”²⁴

When we preach, Lose reminds us, “we are calling our people to take up their part in this story, to struggle to believe in a world of doubt, to love in a world of hate, to make peace in a world of violence, and to offer hope in a world of despair.”²⁵ The framework I’m proposing here is an attempt to help preachers do just that, to claim the Christian narrative as one that can help us make meaning of our lives, inspire communities, transform lives, and even redeem a broken world. This is not a call to return to the “good old days” when the Christian narrative was the only one to choose from and people lived in it by default. This is not an attempt to reclaim

²² Diana Butler Bass, “Christian Nationalism Everywhere?” *The Cottage, Substack*, July 29, 2022, <https://open.substack.com/pub/dianabutlerbass/p/christian-nationalism-everywhere?>

²³ Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads*, 59.

²⁴ Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads*, 60.

²⁵ Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads*, 64.

anything. In my mind, this is something better: an invitation to be part of a story that holds great power and hope. It is not a narrative that has all the answers, not a guidebook or a user's manual for the way we should live. It is a divine love story, with all the complications of any great love. It is a story of an ever-expanding welcome, of a great reversal of the way things are, of a peace that passes understanding. Our task, as preachers, is to believe the good news, invite people in, show them what we've found, and help them find their place in the story.

Tasks of the Preacher: Be Convicted

To be faithful proclaimers of the good news, we must believe it ourselves. That is not to say that preachers are never allowed to have doubts or questions, never to feel our faith falter. We would not be human if we did not. It is, however, true that we ought to be convicted that the good news really is good news, that the Bible – should we find ways to let it speak – really does have something to say. To do this well, we need to be clear in how we understand the Bible as the authoritative text of our faith. Some of our listeners will regard the authority of the Bible as a given and will trust our turn to the scripture without question. Others will be more skeptical. It is not our ultimate goal to convince people that the Bible should be a source of authority. But it is our role to share what we've seen there – the whole purpose of proclamation is to go and tell.

My own understanding of biblical authority and inspiration is captured by Disciples scholars Jan Linn and Michael Kinnamon, who remind us that the word inspired means “God-breathed.”²⁶ The words of scripture are inspired not in the sense that God whispered them directly into the ear of a scribe or guided his pen, but that they are saturated through with the

²⁶ Kinnamon and Linn, *Disciples*, 29.

breath, the life-force, of God. “What Christians throughout the centuries have affirmed is that in this collection of documents – poems, narratives, prophecies, epistles – people can discover the life-giving breath of God. The Bible has authority because through it generations have been brought to faith and instructed in how to live faithfully, and because it invites new generations, including us, to join in an ages-old encounter with the Divine. The Bible, to come at this another way, is the definitive written witness to how our spiritual ancestors experienced God’s self-disclosure – in the story of Israel; in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; in the ministry of the early church.”²⁷ The God-breathed words of scripture have been carried down to us by generations of faithful readers; now it is our turn to be the caretakers and conveyers of the sacred texts.

When we are preaching, we can signal our trust in the text in the way we talk about and read the scripture. In the sermons I watched and analyzed, I found a number of examples of ways preachers can do this well. Cynthia Hale, pastor of Ray of Hope Christian Church in Atlanta, began one recent sermon²⁸ with an introduction before turning to the scripture passage appointed for the day. When it was time for the reading, she said to the congregation, “Let’s go to the Word.” That simple phrase alone signaled to the congregation that this reading – these particular words – were worth paying attention to, that there was something that set *these* words apart and made them *the* Word. She did not stop then to articulate her own personal understanding of the authority of scripture, but the congregation could no doubt sense her own trust in the text.

In addition, when she read the passage, she invited the congregation to join her in reading it responsively, reading every other verse out loud. As I watched this happen, I could tell that the

²⁷ Kinnamon and Linn, *Disciples*, 29.

²⁸ Cynthia Hale, sermon at Ray of Hope Christian Church, Atlanta, GA, 15, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/RayOfHopeChurch/videos/274636398873241/>

congregation was engaging the text in a way they would not have if they had simply been listening. Their many voices became one as they heard their pastor's voice and then their own, paying attention to when they should come in, giving their own voices over to the words of the scripture. This practice not only signaled that this text is important and worth listening to, but also that it is *ours*; it belongs to all of us and all of us can give it voice.

Lori Tapia, National Hispanic Pastor for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), did something similar when she was guest preaching at a congregation in California.²⁹ "Let's see what Scripture tells us," she said as she opened her Bible and stepped away from the pulpit and toward the congregation for the reading. This was both a verbal and a visual cue that signaled to her listeners that the Bible is an authority we can turn to for wisdom, and one that belongs to the whole people of God.

After the reading, Tapia said something else significant as she continued her sermon. "I love the word of God," she said, as she finished the last verse and set the Bible down. "I love the word of God, it just explodes in my mind. When I read the word of God, I feel like it comes alive." Here the tone of her voice changes, and she's not the preacher for a moment; she's just another reader of scripture, amazed and delighted at what she finds in the pages: "It's like the words pop out, and you can see, like cartoons, what's happening. Am I the only one this happens to?" She smiles, indicating she knows this is an unusual description and not a typical response to reading the Bible. She is being vulnerable with the congregation, giving them a glimpse of her personal relationship with the text. The congregation laughs affirmatively. Whether or not they have had this experience, she has connected with them. They know they can trust her, and that she trusts, and loves, the text.

²⁹ Lori Tapia, House of Prayer Christian Church, San Diego, CA, July 16, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/live/XcpJw_e5SBw?si=PDWIKVko_6_4fIEa

Note that neither Hale or Tapia explicitly told their hearers how they should or shouldn't approach a reading of the biblical text. Instead, they signaled their own conviction in the value and authority of the Bible with their words, their actions, and the way they read the text. Neither approach was contrived; this was not a gimmick to convince anyone of something they weren't ready to believe. Instead, in both cases, it was a genuine, authentic expression of the preacher's own faith.

These texts have been entrusted to us. These ancient words have something to say to us. It is a holy, awe-filled task, coming to the people of God with a divine word from the sacred scriptures. When we know that there are those among our listeners who have not yet fallen in love with these words, or have fallen out of love with them, or are hearing them for the first time, we have a sacred responsibility to take this task seriously, to bring to it the full depth of our conviction and our faith.

Tasks of the Preacher: Be a Teacher

One of my family's watch-it-every-year Christmas movies is *The Star*, which is a sort of by the book animated retelling of Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem. Yes, it combines Matthew's version with Luke's and it's a little bit on the nose with the morality ("I don't want to be bad anymore!" says one of the villains of the story when he lays eyes on the baby Jesus), but it's a delightful story with just the right balance of reverence and humor. The main character is a donkey who befriends Mary and ends up carrying her the last leg of the trip. The donkey's name? Bo, short for Boaz. Bo's sidekick is a pigeon named Dave, and along the way they meet a sheep named – wait for it – Ruth. These three animals accompany Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, help

them find the stable when the innkeeper closes the door on them, and then settle in around the manger when the baby is born. If you didn't know that Boaz, Ruth, and David were the names of Jesus' ancestors, you'd miss the nod to those ancient stories. These aren't just any three animals; these friends are a reminder that the story of Jesus is part of a much older, much longer story about how God works in the world.

As preachers, we need to be mindful of the ways we communicate about the scripture text and be aware that our listeners may not have the depth of understanding that helps the Bible speak. As Gail O'Day reminds us above, the gospel message is not dependent on our listeners' knowledge of the Bible. But it is also true that the text becomes fuller, richer, and deeper when we know more about it. The text comes alive in new ways when we know what was happening in the world when it was written, why it was written, how it connects to other parts of scripture, what kind of literature it is, how it ended up in the canon, how it's been read throughout history, and so on. We ought to keep in mind our listeners who only hear the Bible on Sunday morning – or maybe even, only on Christmas Eve – who don't know who Boaz and Ruth are or why they matter, who don't realize that the shepherds and the wisemen are actually two different stories, that each gospel writer tells it a little differently for good reason. Absolutely, God can speak through the scriptures to someone who has never heard it before - and also, it is our responsibility and our call to help people grow in the depth of understanding about the text.

If we are seeking to let these ancient words speak, we have to become teachers. Most of us who preach regularly already do this to some extent. We work a bit of context into the narrative, or we offer a line of explanation before the scripture reading. But it's worth considering how we do this and being intentional about it as we prepare to preach. It's also important to consider our preaching context, as always: some congregations know their Bibles

better than others. A wise preacher will discern the needs of her congregation as she considers how to be a teacher of the text.

An obvious time to do a bit of teaching is as at the time of the scripture reading. Often, the text is read shortly before the sermon by the preacher herself, but even if read by a lay leader, this moment provides an opportunity to give context or to set the stage for what the preacher will say later. This might be as simple as saying something like, “Our reading today is from the gospel of Luke, which is one of the four books that tell us about the life of Jesus. One of the things that we see in Luke’s gospel is an emphasis on the poor, the outcasts, the people on the margins of society. This story is one that is only found in Luke – it’s not in the other three – so you might think about those themes as you listen to the text.”

In addition to providing some background on the reading, this also helps the congregation prepare for what’s coming in the sermon. Laura Phillips, a pastor near Kansas City, did something like this in her recent sermon on the parable of the vineyard. Before reading the scripture for the day, Phillips reminded her congregation of what she had talked about in last week’s sermon, indicating that this could be a continuation of that conversation. She also noted that the sermon would touch on themes of food and labor justice, and invited them to pay attention to those themes in the scripture passage.³⁰

This can also be an opportunity to share some of the reception history of a text. Listeners should be reminded that there are multiple layers in the story. We can pay attention to what’s happening within the text itself, what’s happening in the political and cultural arena when the story was written down, how it was referenced in later scripture, how it has been read and understood throughout Christian history, and how it is heard or understood when we read it

³⁰ Laura Phillips, sermon at Overland Park Christian Church, Overland Park, KS, October 1, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omlXEE1OS9Y&t=2576s>

today. Simply reminding listeners of these layers of reading helps them pay attention to the text in a new way. In addition, acknowledging that a text has been misunderstood or misused in its reading can go a long way in help people come to terms with the hurts they may be carrying.

Another effective way that preachers can be teachers is to weave education into the sermon itself. This doesn't mean stopping to insert a didactic lecture. Rather, the preacher can tell the story in such a way that the literary or historical context is included. This example from an older sermon by Disciples leader Ronald Osborn shows how this can be done. Notice how much information is conveyed here, but in a very narrative, relatable way:

“Fly now with me in imagination to the Land between the Rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. We call it Iraq, but 4000 years ago it was named Chaldea. Set out with me from the prosperous city of Ur, pushing to the northwest across Syria and into southern Turkey, into the region then called Haran. Make your way with me through the crowded mall, quaintly known as the market square. As people squirm and shove through the crowd, we overhear a conversation. ‘Have you heard the latest about Abram?’... “The two of them were old people – older than anyone at your local retirement home; and, when a strange guest announced that she and Abraham would have a son, Sarah laughed. Nevertheless, without resort to a fertility clinic, a son was born, and those two oldsters called him Laughter (the meaning of “Isaac.” Along with the Jerusalem Bible, the Revised English Bible places Sarah on equal footing with the other great exemplars of faith, translating the confusing Greek of Hebrews 11:11: ““by faith even Sarah herself was enabled to conceive because she judged that God who had promised would keep faith.””³¹

Several of the contemporary sermons I watched also offered historical and literary textual context in their messages. Julian DeShazier, preaching on a text from the book of Romans, spent time in the sermon explaining the context of ancient Rome. “Let’s try to understand what’s happening in the world of Romans,” he said.³² Lori Tapia, who I quoted above, also taught her

³¹ Ronald Osborn, “Faith,” in *The Living Pulpit: Sermons That Illustrate Preaching in the Stone-Campbell Movement 1968-2018*, Mary Alice Mulligan, ed. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2018), 213.

³² Julian DeShazier, sermon at University Church, Chicago, IL, July 23, 2023, <https://fb.watch/n2Z0PW1Z4k/>

listeners about the context of the text she was using in her sermon. “Let me give you some background so we’re all on the same page,” she said, before giving exegetical context.³³ Rebecca Anderson, preaching at Gilead Church in Chicago about Jesus’ “turn the other cheek” teaching, says to her listeners: “You all know this, right? We’ve talked about it before.... I’ll rehash it quickly,” and then proceeds to explain that the “eye for an eye” teaching found in Exodus and other ancient writings is intended to limit the escalation of violence, but that Jesus’ teaching turns this on its head, telling his followers not to use violence at all.³⁴

Notice that none of these preachers dumbed down their sermons by assuming they were preaching to people who didn’t know much about the Bible. Instead, they found ways to broaden the knowledge of their listeners in an engaging way. Nor did they shame people for not knowing. In fact, Anderson’s technique did the opposite. Her “you all know this, right?” indicates a high regard for her listeners, even as her subsequent explanation conveys that she also understands that they probably don’t “all know this.” The savvy preacher will know her listeners well enough to know what techniques will work best in her context.

In addition to providing historical and literary context at the time of the scripture reading or in the sermon proper, a third opportunity is to include a teaching moment at a different time in the service. Such a teaching moment can provide a bit of explanation about the text, offered separately from the sermon, so that the sermon can stand alone. This was done effectively during the four worship services held at the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in July 2023. Scholar Eric Smith offered a brief scriptural study as part of each worship service by providing exegetical context and language study on the texts of the day. These were

³³ Lori Tapia, sermon at House of Prayer Christian Church, San Diego, CA, July 16, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/live/XcpJw_e5SBw?si=PDWIKVko_6_4flEa

³⁴ Rebecca Anderson, sermon at Gilead Church, Chicago, IL, July 23, 2023, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/it-was-hard-to-turn-the-other-cheek-when/id1464610798?i=1000622187879>

more akin to mini lectures than to sermons and set the stage for the preaching that followed.

Although that setting was unique, this method can work in local congregations as well. It need not be the preacher who does this teaching, and in fact perhaps could be a chance for a strong lay leader or elder in the congregation to set up. It could also provide an opportunity to use multimedia or humor, or to invite a high schooler or college student to take on the role.

Scholar Karoline Lewis writes in *Preaching the Word*, “We do not just read the Bible as descriptive of God and of how to live life as a believer. We engage in constant interplay between what the Bible says, what we think it says, what we want it to say, and how all of that lines up, or does not, with our experiences of God.”³⁵ To let the Bible truly speak, we would do well to recognize that constant interplay, and to give people the tools they need to listen to these ancient words themselves. Our listeners’ experience will be deeper and our preaching more impactful if we equip them to hear the text in all its layered richness.

Tasks of the Preacher: Be a Poet

“Preach the gospel every day,” goes the popular saying, “Use words if necessary.”³⁶

While it’s true that there are powerful ways to preach the gospel with no words at all, the preacher’s task is to find words with which to proclaim the good news. Even in our technological age of images, videos, and memes, words are still the primary medium of the preacher. The challenging paradox, of course, is that anytime we try to convey the vastness of God, anytime we attempt to pin God down with words, our ability to explain the good news is hindered by the

³⁵ Karoline Lewis, *Preaching the Word: Contemporary Approaches to the Bible for the Pulpit* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023), 47.

³⁶ The source of this quote is unknown, though it is often attributed to St. Francis Assisi.

limits of human language. Our impossible task, then, is that we are called to use words to describe that which cannot possibly be described with words.

We must, then, be poets.

“Poetic speech” insists Walter Brueggemann, “is the only proclamation that is worthy of the name preaching.”³⁷ In his formative book on preaching, *Finally Comes the Poet*, Brueggemann argues that poetic language is the language of the scripture itself, and only poetic language has the power to break through our “prose-flattened world” to help us imagine the good news of an alternative way of life. “This moment of speech,” he writes, “is a poetic rendering in a community that has come all too often to expect nothing but prose. It is a prose world for all those who must meet payrolls and grade papers and pump gas and fly planes. When the text, too, has been reduced to prose, life becomes so prosaic that there is a dread dullness that besets the human spirit. We become mindless conformists or angry protesters, and there is no health in us. We become so beaten by prose that only poetic articulation has a chance to let us live.”³⁸

This is not to say that preachers must learn to preach in rhyming iambic pentameter, of course. We must be poets in the sense that we pay close attention to the language we use, that we choose our words carefully and creatively. “Preaching,” writes Teresa Fry Brown, “is an opportunity to use God’s gift of language to its fullest.”³⁹ When we understand that language is a gift from God, we open up new possibilities of expressing the good news.

Despite the limitations of human language, words are one of the primary ways we make sense of the divine. God speaks the world into being in Genesis 1. The Psalmist tells us in Psalm

³⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 3.

³⁸ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 9.

³⁹ Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon: Voice, Body, and Animation in Proclamation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008) 14.

119 that God's word is a lamp to our feet, a light to our path. John proclaims that the Word was with God in the beginning, the Word was God. At Pentecost, the Spirit sweeps through and all the people gathered there can understand each other's languages.⁴⁰ "The genre of the Bible," Lance Pope writes, "is neither accurate historical report, nor encoded moral myth, but rather adequate poetic testimony. It is literal in the sense that it really is about what it seems to be about (the nature of God, the substitutable identity of Jesus as God's unique agent, and so on), but its stories are closer in form to narrative theological poems, than factually rigorous chronicles."⁴¹ We are called, then, to be poetic in the way that the Bible is poetic, to use the gift of language to its fullest, to use words to tell the truth about that which cannot be described in words.

Katie Hays, pastor of Galileo Church, is a master of language. In a sermon on Pentecost Sunday, on a weekend when the congregation was celebrating their tenth anniversary, she preached on the story of Jesus healing a man suffering from leprosy. She challenges her listeners to understand that this story is not about a medical healing, but about the restoration of this man to his community. "What if," Hays wonders, "the point of the healing miracles is the putting of people back together with their people, the restoration of relationship wherever it has gotten broken. So that – listen..." here she pauses, and we understand that she is not just talking about the people in the Bible but the people in the pews - "so that no one Jesus encounters is left alone, ever again." It's a powerful moment made even more powerful when she returns to the same phrasing later in the sermon, as she reminds the church on the occasion of their anniversary what they are called to do: "So that – listen – no one is left alone, ever again."⁴²

⁴⁰ Genesis 1:3; Psalm 119:105; John 1:1; Acts 2:4.

⁴¹ Lance Pape, "Preaching in the Postliberal Theological Family," in *Preaching the Manifold Grace of God, Volume 2: Theologies of Preaching in the Early Twenty-First Century*, Ron Allen, ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022) 50.

⁴² Katie Hays, sermon at Galileo Church, Fort Worth, TX, May 28, 2023, <https://www.galileochurch.org/tomorrow-and-tomorrow-and-tomorrow>.

Yolanda Norton, in a sermon at the General Assembly, used repetition of language in a different but equally powerful way. Preaching on the story of the tower of Babel, Norton suggests that God's scattering of the people is not a punishment, but an invitation to grow. "You've got to scatter. Experience something that makes you uncomfortable. Scatter! Learn something you didn't know before. Scatter! Be somewhere where you have to realize that you aren't the center of the universe. You've got to scatter!"⁴³ Repeating the word *scatter* was an invitation and a challenge: an invitation to see our lives in the context of the biblical story, and a challenge to accept God's call to grow and change.

William Barber, currently one of Disciples best known preachers, also uses language creatively and powerfully. In a recent sermon, he offered the following imagery of the people Jesus saw as he walked along Galilee: "They don't look like much. probably on the lower end of the economic spectrum... They're physically dirty, they smell, their work was challenging... they would have been the oppressed."⁴⁴ This vivid depiction not only helps us imagine the world of the Bible, it also – as I'll discuss in more detail below – helps us hear from people in the text who we might otherwise ignore.

To be poets of the word of God, we ought to also be intentional consumers of language. The advice to writers holds true for preachers as well: to be a good writer (or preacher), one should be a good reader. Preachers should read poetry and fiction, essay and memoir, sci fi and fantasy – not in search of sermon illustrations or zinger quotes, but to let the good words of other writers soak in. Any good writing counts, but we should pay particular attention to writers who

⁴³ Yolanda Norton, sermon at General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Louisville, KY, July 30, 2023.

⁴⁴ William Barber, sermon at Beargrass Christian Church, Louisville, KY, July 30, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRa1LOVQk98&list=PLFCWURfHNpDfE2RyNMzo2v3wX5X3yhrw0&t=2877s>

engage the scriptures. One recent example is *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us*, by Cole Arthur Riley.⁴⁵ Her technique of seamlessly weaving her own story into and through the stories of scriptures, taking creative liberties that bring the Bible to life in new ways, is a must-read for preachers.

As in most aspects of preaching, context matters greatly when considering how we use language. Fry Brown notes: "Language provides a means for building a community between speakers and listeners,"⁴⁶ and preachers do well to consider their ministry contexts when thinking about what kind of poet they should be. In some preaching contexts, a well-placed swear word brings the sermon home; in others, it would land the preacher in hot water.

Frank A. Thomas has highlighted the role of preaching in African American congregations and demonstrates how the community is built between speaker and listeners when a sermon is carefully designed to build toward celebration.⁴⁷ Robin Hedgeman, also preaching in an African American context, used language powerfully to build the connection with her listeners. After a long passage building the definition of a lukewarm faith – "lukewarm is indifferent; lukewarm is half-hearted, lukewarm is apathetic, lukewarm is lackadaisical, lukewarm is unresponsive, lukewarm is unmoved." she built to the high point of this section of her sermon: "Lukewarm might be okay when you're talking about food, but lukewarm is not okay when you're talking about the presence of the Lord, when you're talking about the church, the church is called to be on fire!"⁴⁸ The contrast of the word *lukewarm* with the call to the

⁴⁵ Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us*. (New York: Convergent, 2022).

⁴⁶ Brown, *Delivering the Sermon*, 6.

⁴⁷ Frank A. Thomas, *They like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching* (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1997).

⁴⁸ Robin Hedgeman, sermon at Bethany Christian Church, Cleveland, OH, Nov. 5, 2023, <https://bethanychristianchurch-doc.org/watch-live/>

church to be *on fire* no doubt inspired her listeners to consider how God was calling them to respond.

Words matter. We're called to be poets in a particular place and time: be the poet that your community needs so that the Bible can speak.

Tasks of the Preacher: Be a Host

I went to a party recently at the home of a friend I didn't know well. I was anxious as I headed up the front walk, not sure if I would know anyone or even if this was even the right house. But my friend met me at the door with a hug and ushered me inside. "Coats go upstairs," she said. "Drinks are here in the dining room and there's food in the kitchen. I'm glad you could come." A good party host makes her guests feel welcome, invites them in, shows them around, and lets them know they belong. What if that's what a good preacher does too?

Tom Long writes, "We are called to proclaim a narrative that people could not conjure up out of their own resources, the gospel narrative, and then to help people let that narrative become the story that shapes, guides, and clarifies their lives and gives them their primary identity."⁴⁹ To do this, to help people orient their lives to the gospel narrative, we need to be good hosts who invite people into the story, pay attention to those who are listening, and make sure everyone is included.

First, we invite people in. This is not about inviting people to church in the first place; this is about helping our listeners find their place in the story. This becomes especially important when we remember that many of those listening will only be encountering the Bible in the

⁴⁹ Thomas G. Long, "Out of the Loop," in *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching? Essays in Honor of Eugene L. Lowry*, Mike Graves and David J. Schlafer, eds. (Saint Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2008), 129.

sermon moment and will have little context for the text. If a sermon includes terms or concepts that are foreign to them – if, for example, the preacher refers to the Babylonian exile or the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem with no explanation – or if a listener needs a degree in theology or a lifetime of Bible study to decode the message, listeners will find it hard to find their way in. Likewise, if we ignore the harm the Bible has done and disregard the church-induced wounds many of our listeners carry, they will understandably keep these scriptures at arm's length. But if we can open up the Bible stories in a way that makes them accessible to everyone, that helps us understand that the people of the Bible faced the same challenges we face, that makes us see that God is still at work in our stories, then perhaps these ancient words can speak to us. "Otherwise," Chris Furr says in a sermon on the book of Exodus, "this is a dusty old book with Hittites and Jebusites and stuff we don't know anything about. But we know something about xenophobia so we can listen to where God is in the midst of the story."⁵⁰ We invite people in to the text and help them to see that this is a story about all of us.

Consider the example from Katie Hays highlighted above. By explaining that Jesus's healing of the man with leprosy as being about restoring right relationship to the community, Hays' listeners – many of whom come with plenty of baggage about the church from past experiences – could begin to see themselves in the role of the man with leprosy: as estranged from the community but welcomed back in by Jesus. They could see, also, that their role as the church was to continue Jesus' healing work, to restore others to right relationship with their communities – "putting people back together with their people."⁵¹ Cynthia Hale used a much more direct approach to invite her listeners into the story. In a sermon about using our gifts, she

⁵⁰ Chris Furr, sermon preached at Covenant Christian Church, Cary, NC, October 1, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/Covenant.DisciplesofChrist/videos/345120368049734>.

⁵¹ Katie Hays, sermon at Galileo Church, Fort Worth, TX, May 28, 2023, <https://www.galileochurch.org/tomorrow-and-tomorrow-and-tomorrow>.

challenged people to consider how they were using their gifts to serve the church. She asked them to turn to a neighbor and talk about what gifts they were using, then stepped down from the pulpit and walked into the congregation, looking people directly in the eye and asking them how they would serve.⁵² Robin Hedgeman, in her sermon on the text “Behold, I am standing at the door, knocking,” encouraged her listeners to imagine themselves on the other side of that door. Would they answer?⁵³

Several of the sermons I watched invited people into the story by inviting them to be part of the work of the church. Julian DeShazier encouraged his congregation to think about the hard things they were being called to do.⁵⁴ Laura Phillips oriented her sermon toward gathering around the communion table as the church.⁵⁵ Linda McCrae told her congregation that God has a particular interest in the needs of the poor, and then said, “We in this place know this to be true.” For a congregation that has long been invested in justice and advocacy work, as well as meeting the needs of its neighbors, McCrae’s reminder in the sermon helped to place them in the context of the gospel narrative.⁵⁶

In addition to finding ways to invite people into the story, preachers need to pay attention to who is listening to them. For any given sermon, there are at least the following categories of listeners: the faithful, who have been around church their whole lives and who know the story well; the skeptical, who don’t think the church has much to offer and come out of obligation or don’t come at all; the curious, who are cautiously hopeful that the church might offer something

⁵² Cynthia Hale, sermon at Ray of Hope Christian Church, Atlanta, GA, <https://www.facebook.com/RayOfHopeChurch/videos/274636398873241/>

⁵³ Robin Hedgeman, sermon at Bethany Christian Church, Cleveland, OH, <https://bethanychristianchurch-doc.org/watch-live/>

⁵⁴ Julian DeShazier, sermon at University Church, Chicago, IL, July 23, 2023, <https://fb.watch/n2Z0PW1Z4k/>

⁵⁵ Laura Phillips, sermon at Overland Park Christian Church, Overland Park, KS, October 1, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omlXEE1OS9Y&t=2576s>

⁵⁶ Linda McCrae, sermon at Central Christian Church, Indianapolis, IN, November 26, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4_HOjPQICI&t=1991s

for them or for the world; and the traumatized, who have been deeply hurt by the church in the past and who carry those scars with them even now. We could no doubt identify others. Of course, these categories might overlap and shift over time, and some congregations will lean heavily one way or another. A wise preacher who seeks to be a good host will think carefully about who is listening to her preach. This is especially true for the listeners who are skeptical or who have been wounded by the church. Katie Hays is again helpful here, as the congregation she serves, Galileo Church, considers itself a home for “spiritual refugees” and makes an intentional effort to be welcoming to those who have not been welcomed in the past.⁵⁷

A good host will also make room for those who carry wounds of other kinds. Sarah Travis, in *Preaching and Trauma Informed Theology* explores how preachers can be mindful of listeners who come to the sermon moment carrying the scars of past traumas.⁵⁸ She writes,

“I find myself always pushing toward resurrection – always looking for the flower inside the bulb or the butterfly inside the cocoon. This is a personal grace that I have endured suffering and yet continued to flourish. I wonder, though, how this grace has blinded me to the plight of others who cannot find resurrection, who cannot dare to hope because present reality is too painful? To push too quickly toward resurrection may be the least pastoral response imaginable.”⁵⁹

For example, preachers will want to think carefully about how to preach on the Bible stories in which barren women miraculously give birth: how will that sound to a couple in the congregation who has been dealing with infertility and who have prayed fervently for just such a miracle that has not come? How will a healing story sound to a parishioner who has just been diagnosed with terminal cancer? Faithful preachers will make room for their listener’s hurt, grief, and anger, and allow for deep questions that do not have easy answers.

⁵⁷ Katie Hays, *We Were Spiritual Refugees: A Story to Make You Believe in Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020).

⁵⁸ Sarah Travis, *Unspeakable: Preaching and Trauma-Informed Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021).

⁵⁹ Travis, *Unspeakable*, 9.

Finally, the preacher as host will want to make sure that everyone is included by asking: who aren't we hearing from in the text? For many preachers, especially those who primarily preach from the Revised Common Lectionary, the same Bible passages and characters show up year after year, but the scriptures are rich with stories and people who rarely get a turn in the spotlight. Making room for the voices we seldom hear is important for a number of reasons but perhaps most importantly this: if our listeners hear people being silenced in the scripture and in the pulpit, won't they wonder if they will be silenced too? Giving voice to the people in the text opens up possibilities for everyone to be heard.

There are a number of ways to do hear these silenced voices. Most obviously, we can simply choose to preach from lesser known passages of the Bible, and focus on those who have traditionally been left out. Wil Gafney's *Old Testament Midrash*⁶⁰ is a good place to start. In it, she focuses on the stories of women in the Hebrew scriptures, and preachers will no doubt find stories that they've never had an opportunity to lift up in a sermon. Gafney has also created *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church*, which lays out a schedule of readings that includes many stories not included in the RCL.⁶¹

Preachers can also pay attention to the people at the margins of our texts. Chris Furr does this in his sermon from Exodus. Instead of focusing on the well-known story of Moses and the burning bush, he tells the story of the midwives, Siphrah and Puah. He notes that it is these women, along with Moses's sister and mother and Pharaoh's daughter, who usher in the movement toward freedom for the Israelites, and then highlights women who have been on the

⁶⁰ Wilda Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*, First edition. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).

⁶¹ Wilda Gafney, *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church: Year W: A Multi-Gospel Single-Year Lectionary* (New York, NY: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2021).

forefront of modern freedom movements.⁶² William Barber's sermon, mentioned above, imagines the people Jesus saw as he walked by the sea of Galilee. His attention to the people who don't get top billing in the story echoes his commitment to work for the rights of those in our own time who are left out and pushed aside.⁶³

Listening to all the voices is important not only when we approach the text, but also in our preparation. Whose voices are we listening to when we consult commentaries and exegetical resources? What extra-textual stories are we telling? We will be better hosts if we expand the range of resources we consult and listen to the voices of those whose experience is not like ours. We will be better equipped to welcome people in and point them toward the good news.

Tasks of the Preacher: Be a Guide

On my desk, I have a framed picture of my kids and my niece and nephew sitting on a beach towel on the shore of Lake Erie at sunrise. The kids are facing away from the camera, toward the lake, wrapped in blankets and sweatshirts to ward off the morning chill. My nephew, six years old at the time, is pointing off across the water to where the sun has just broken the line of the horizon. I've earned a bit of a reputation among the children in my family that I will almost always want to get up early on vacation and go out to the beach, and I'll take anyone along with me who is willing to roll out of bed. I love watching the sunrise myself, but my absolute favorite thing is going with the kids and watching what happens to their faces when the

⁶² Chris Furr, sermon preached at Covenant Christian Church, Cary, NC, October 1, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/Covenant.DisciplesofChrist/videos/345120368049734>.

⁶³ William Barber, sermon at Beargrass Christian Church, Louisville, KY, July 30, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRa1LOVQk98&list=PLFCWURfHNpDfE2RyNMzo2v3wX5X3yhrw0&t=2877s>

sun pops up, burning bright orange. "Wow!" someone usually says, low and under their breath, as if they can't quite believe it. Also, "Look!" as they point across the water. It is a gift to be the one who has brought them out to see it.

Something like that, I think, is our task in preaching. We approach the text in such a way that we invite people to join us in something we have found meaningful and beautiful. We point it out to them so that they can see it for themselves, maybe even be delighted by it, or astonished by it, or convicted by it, and then maybe they will point it out to someone else. We point to the mysteries of the text and let the divine light shine. We make room for curiosity and questions. We create a safe space to voice pain and doubt. And if we do this well, we open the way for people to glimpse the new world we find when we follow the way of God.

Almost like a museum docent, preachers lead their listeners to something they have found meaningful. This doesn't mean the preacher has to have all the answers; there isn't always a clear answer about what the text means or what we should do in response. It's okay for the preacher not to know; sometimes the mysteries of God are more powerful than certainty. "Look at this," the preacher can say. "Isn't this amazing?"

Several preachers I observed used this technique. Robin Hedgeman, toward the end of her sermon on Revelation 3:20-22, paused her delivery and slowed her speaking so her listeners would pay attention. "I see something else in the text," she said, before going on to explain what she saw.⁶⁴ Brian Frederick Gray points his listeners to two small words in Psalm 107, "and yet," and builds the rest of his sermon on that phrase.⁶⁵ Lance Pape, preaching on a text that proclaims "the dead will rise," doesn't try to explain the resurrection but instead points to the mysteries of

⁶⁴ Robin Hedgeman, sermon at Bethany Christian Church, Cleveland, OH, Nov. 5, 2023, <https://bethanychristianchurch-doc.org/watch-live/>

⁶⁵ Brian Frederick Gray, sermon at First Christian Church, Black Mountain, NC, Nov. 5, 2023, <https://fb.watch/n33jxLhiJB/>

it and invites his listeners to consider how it would have originally been heard and why that text was recorded. He reflects on the power of memory, and notes that “Resurrection does nothing for scars.”⁶⁶

Preachers who serve as guides for their listeners will make room for curiosity. We can show people what we have found in the text, and then invite them to bring their own questions. Here, we can take a cue from Montessori-based Christian education for children (called “Children Worship and Wonder” in most Disciples churches, or “Godly Play” in others). In these programs, a Bible story is told without commentary or explanation, and then the teacher leads the children in a series of “wondering” questions: “I wonder how the man felt when Jesus healed him. I wonder what the people watching were thinking. I wonder what this story has to say to us today.” This approach allows people to move around in the text, to find their own place in the story, without dictating for them what it all means. Linda McCrae, in her sermon on Matthew 25:31-46, explained why she believes stories about the end times are important, despite the sometimes problematic nature of the concept of eternal damnation. Then she said, “I wonder if this is about what we see.” thereby inviting her listeners to wonder along with her.⁶⁷

Ultimately, the preacher as guide is not just helping her listeners notice interesting things along the way. Rather, she is pointing toward a vision for a new reality, one in which God’s love reigns. Writes Lance Pape, “The stories of the Bible are not best understood as reliable or unreliable descriptions of the world we already know, but as a proposal about a possible world that is available to those who trust their testimony.”⁶⁸ Walter Brueggeman’s assertion that good

⁶⁶ Lance Pape, sermon preached at Bethany Memorial Church, Bethany WV, Sept. 17, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/bmcwv/videos/687570996630570>

⁶⁷ Linda McCrae, sermon at Central Christian Church, Indianapolis, IN, November 26, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4_HOjPQICI&t=1991s

⁶⁸ Pape, “Preaching in the Postliberal Theological Family,” 51.

preaching must be poetic speech has this end in mind as well. Such preaching, he writes, “[is] the ready, steady, surprising proposal that the real world in which God invites us to live is not the one made available by the rulers of this age.”⁶⁹ In the end, this is the pressing task of the preacher: to show people the new world that is possible, that they have a place in it, that God is at work in *this* world, making it new.

Preachers guide us to this good news by pointing to the new world in the Bible and the new world breaking through in our time as well. Owen Chandler, preaching at the Disciples General Assembly, points out stories of Jesus welcoming outsiders and notes that as God welcomes people in, “the kingdom becomes uncomfortably bigger. But hope gets to write the future now. See, in each case, we learn that the story shapes the love of God by people who were supposed to be outside of God’s love.” Chandler, a military chaplain, grounded this good news in a story about serving in Afghanistan at the time of the fall of Kabul in 2021 when he and his unit were tasked with setting up aid stations in the midst of complete devastation and suffering. More than once, they were faced with the challenge of serving the very people who had caused so much suffering. The reality that no one was outside of God’s love became a touchpoint that guided their work, even in the middle of such pain and grief.⁷⁰

This final task of the preacher may be the holiest and the hardest. To serve as a guide to the people of God, pointing out the divine mysteries revealed in the text, opening up the scriptures so that our listeners can wonder and ask questions, to resist the urge toward certainty... all this can help us guide the way to the gospel good news that there is a different way of life God longs to reveal here and now.

⁶⁹ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 3.

⁷⁰ Owen Chandler, sermon at the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Louisville, KY, July 29, 2023.

Conclusion

These ancient words are holy and mysterious, profound and mundane, full of beauty and grit, at times indecipherable, at times as clear as day. These words contain the breath of God, who spoke the world to life. These words contain the story of Jesus, the healing and peacemaking, the welcoming in, the death on the cross, the empty tomb. These words have the power of new life, a new world.

For Disciples preachers, we give thanks for the “light of scripture” that has been given to all of us. We understand the Bible to be a living book. We approach the text with openness, bringing our own knowledge and experience to it. We remain committed to freedom in interpretation, and we study the scriptures in community and in covenant with one another. We trust that in these words the love of God, the hope of Christ, and the movement of the Holy Spirit will be revealed.

To stand before the people of God and proclaim the good news is an awesome calling. To interpret the Bible in such a way that it has something to do with us is a bold endeavor. To preach at all is an act of faith. And so, we trust that the Spirit will move, that the text will open itself up to us, that it has something important to say. We share the rich history of the words. We use the power of language, the power of words, to describe that which is beyond our understanding. We welcome people in and help them find their place in the story. We point the way to what we have found, the mystery and the hope of the gospel. Then, by the grace of God, the words will speak.

Appendix: Sermons Consulted

Rebecca Anderson

sermon preached at Gilead Church, July 23, 2023

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/it-was-hard-to-turn-the-other-cheek-when/id1464610798?i=1000622187879>

William Barber II

sermon preached at Beargrass Christian Church during General Assembly, July 30, 2023

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRa1LOVQk98&list=PLFCWURfHNpDfE2RyNMzo2v3wX5X3yhrw0&t=2877s>

Owen Chandler

sermon preached at General Assembly, July 29, 2023

(recording not available publicly)

Julian DeShazier

sermon preached at University Church, July 23, 2023

<https://fb.watch/n2Z0PW1Z4k/>

Elizbeth Grasham

sermon preached at First Christian Church Nowata, September 10, 2023

<https://fb.watch/n33jxLhiJB/>

Brian Frederick-Gray

sermon preached at First Christian Church Black Mountain, November 5, 2023

<https://fb.watch/n33jxLhiJB/>

Chris Furr

sermon preached at Covenant Christian Church, October 1, 2023

<https://www.facebook.com/Covenant.DisciplesofChrist/videos/345120368049734>

Cynthia Hale

sermon preached at Ray of Hope Christian Church, October 15, 2023

<https://www.facebook.com/RayOfHopeChurch/videos/274636398873241/>

Katy Hays

sermon preached at Galileo Church, May 28, 2023

<https://www.galileochurch.org/tomorrow-and-tomorrow-and-tomorrow>

Robin Hedgeman

sermon preached at Bethany Christian Church, November 5, 2023

<https://bethanychristianchurch-doc.org/watch-live/>

Michael Karunas

sermon preached at Central Christian Church Decatur, October 8, 2023

https://www.youtube.com/live/RbppzZY_kU8?si=yizolORmlXSMDvBO

Linda McCrae

sermon preached at Central Christian Church Indianapolis, November 26, 2023

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4_HOjPQICI&t=1991s

Yolanda Norton

sermon preached at General Assembly, July 30, 2023

(recording not publicly available)

Lance Pape

sermon preached at Bethany Memorial Church, September 17, 2023

<https://www.facebook.com/bmcwv/videos/687570996630570>

Laura Phillips

sermon preached at Overland Park Christian Church, October 1, 2023

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omlXEE1OS9Y&t=2576s>

Samuel Ramirez

sermon preached at House of Prayer Church, September 3, 2023

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArIoNS6hBGQ>

Lori Tapia

sermon preached at House of Prayer Church, July 16, 2023

https://www.youtube.com/live/XcpJw_e5SBw?si=PDWIKVko_6_4fIEa

Questions used for analysis:

How does this sermon provide context/education for the text for those who may not be familiar with it?

How does this sermon engage imaginative or poetic language? In what way and to what end?

How/why/in what way does this sermon view the Bible as authoritative? How do we know? What does this sermon tell us about the convictions of the preacher? (Is that what they would want us to hear?)

How does this sermon invite people to move? How does the sermon move? What motion is implied or encouraged?

How does this sermon invite people to connect their lives to the text? Should such connection be encouraged or discouraged? Are there other connections that could be revealed?

How does this sermon invite people to reflect on the movement of God in their own lives?

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