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Recapture the Call: A Theology of Preaching as Proclamation in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Tricia L. Tedrow
Luther Seminary

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RECAPTURE THE CALL:
A THEOLOGY OF PREACHING AS PROCLAMATION
IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

by

TRICIA L. TEDROW

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

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ABSTRACT

*Recapture the Call:
A Theology of Preaching as Proclamation
In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

by

Tricia L. Tedrow

This thesis explores preaching as proclamation in light of recent changes to the title and description for ordained ministers in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Reflection on Scripture, confessional statements of the denomination and writings on the theology of preaching lead to a theology of preaching as proclamation written by the author. Two sermons are compared to show how the creation of a theology of preaching sharpens one's preaching. The thesis concludes with reflections on how style, voice and the issue of power in proclamation have a place in the future of preaching in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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Special thanks goes to the members of my cohort group who became more than peers, but dear friends who supported me through all the challenges life threw my way. To Chris, Lee, Cindy, Amrela, Laurie, Steve, Ramona, Richard, Elisabeth and Leslie (who stayed with us in spirit and was a great cheerleader to us all), thank you for becoming a part of my life. I also wish to acknowledge the patience and support of Dick, the best advisor ever!

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
PC(USA)	Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM, JUSTIFICATION AND RATIONALE

Introduction

In the fall of 2006, I attended the Celebration of Biblical Preaching event at Luther Seminary. It was my first foray into the idea of biblical preaching and I took to it like the proverbial duck to water. My mind wandered during Dr. Karoline Lewis' key note about preaching the Gospel of John. This was not the usual type of wandering where I thought about how I would preach a certain passage or entertained myself with song lyrics. Instead I experienced a type of spiritual smack-down. The internal monologue went something like this:

In the beginning was the Word.

The Word was with God.

The Word was God.

Jesus Christ is the Word.

The Word.

I am a minister of Word and Sacrament.

A minister of the Word.

A minister of *the* Word?

I became captivated with the idea that as clergy we are not called to preach just any word, but that we are called to preach the Word that is Christ. I began exploring what that meant and became aware of how preaching was being treated in some corners of

Christendom. I noticed as a worshipper how sermons were no different than motivational speeches and life-lessons. I saw websites dedicated to helping the busy preacher write a sermon in just a few hours. I attended lectionary discussion groups where members talked about using canned sermons from topically themed programs churned out by Christian publishing companies and denominational publishers. I began to wonder what was happening where preaching was concerned.

I listened to colleagues talk (sometimes complaining but also bragging) about how little time they had to write sermons. I even began to feel guilty about the amount of sermon preparation time I took each week. Was that a luxury I could ill afford if I wanted to be an effective pastor? Was I spending too much time in exegetical work and writing in a culture that expected me to be busy with meetings and projects?

But that idea of being a minister of *the Word* would not be easily dismissed from my mind. I found myself thinking seriously about what I was preaching and why. This notion became even more pressing in 2010 when an overture to the General Assembly of the PC(USA) was made that changed the title from Minister of the Word and Sacrament to Teaching Elder. I found myself thinking about what it means to be a minister of the Word and Sacrament and what that meant in regards to preaching. I began to sense that some of the issues we faced as a denomination were not issues of cultural change, but were theological issues. As we moved as ministers in the denomination towards making ourselves more accessible, were we losing a key part of what it means to be the church and what it means for those of us called to ordained ministry? Perhaps what is needed is to recapture the sense of call to be minister of the Word and to see preaching as proclamation of the gospel of Christ who is the Word.

The Problem

In 2010, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) sent an amendment to the constitution to the presbyteries for ratification that would change the form of government for the denomination. By June 2011, a majority of the presbyteries had approved the new form commonly referred to as nFOG.¹ The purpose of the changes was to move away from a “one size fits all” model of polity to one that lifted up the essential tenets and standards of the constitution while empowering governing bodies to respond effectively to their particular mission and ministry. Among the changes was an alteration to the title used for clergy and the description of duties of the pastor.

Prior to 2011², ordained clergy in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) were referred to as Ministers of the Word and Sacrament. “As the Lord has set aside through calling and training certain members to perform a special ministry of the Word and Sacrament and has committed to do so, the church through the presbytery calls them to the responsibility and office of ministers of the Word and Sacrament.”³ The former *Book of Order* also contained a rich description of the role of the ordained pastor.

When a minister of the Word and Sacrament is called as pastor or associate pastor of a particular church or churches, she or he is to be responsible for a quality of life and relationships that commend the gospel to all persons and that communicate its joy and its justice. The pastor is responsible to studying, teaching, and preaching the Word, for administering Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, for praying with and for the congregation.⁴

¹ nFOG is an acronym for the phrase, “new Form of Government.” It is part of the denomination’s nomenclature used when referring to our current *Book of Order*.

² Prior to 2011, page numbers were not included in the *Book of Order*. All footnotes for the *Book of Order* quoted before the 2011 version will contain section references instead of page numbers.

³ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Part II the Book of Order*, (USA: The Office of the General Assembly, 2004), G-6.0201.

⁴ *Ibid.*, G-6.0202b.

The new Form of Government changed the title of ordained clergy from Minister of the Word and Sacrament to Teaching Elder. The description of ministry also changed with a significant section removed that was expressive of the minister's identity and calling. The removed section used titles and names derived from Scripture and the Reformed tenets of faith.

As he or she has the oversight of the flock of Christ, he or she is termed bishop. As he or she feeds them with spiritual food, he or she is termed pastor. As a servant of Christ in the Church, the term minister is given. As it is his or her duty to be grave and prudent, and an example to the Flock, and to govern well in the house and Kingdom of Christ, he or she is termed presbyter or elder. As he or she is sent to declare the will of God to sinners, and to beseech them to be reconciled to God, through Christ, he or she is termed ambassador. And as he or she dispenses the manifold grace of God and the ordinances instituted by Christ, he or she is termed steward of the mysteries of God.⁵

This shift in language and description was argued for on two fronts. First, it addressed the concept of parity between teaching and ruling elders (lay leaders). As a denomination that holds strongly to the priesthood of all believers, lifting some above others was viewed as inappropriate or even antiquated in a denomination that finds itself shifting from a focus on full-time called clergy to part-time lay pastors in parish ministry. The other argument dealt with parity within the ranks of clergy itself as more people are being ordained to "specialized ministries". The proponents for the change argued that using the term Minister of the Word and Sacrament excluded clergy who were called to

⁵ Ibid., G-6.0202a.

ministry outside the pastorate (including hospital chaplains, seminary professors, campus ministers, and other work that is validated as specialized ministry).⁶

The proposal has adopted terminology concerning church offices that is markedly different than that with which most Presbyterians are familiar. Instead of “church offices,” the proposal speaks of “ordered ministries”; rather than “minister of the Word and Sacrament,” the proposal utilizes the term “teaching elder.” These changes call for special consideration by both the assembly and the church generally.

As stated above, these changes have the purpose of reclaiming the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, that is, the shared nature of the mission and ministry of the Church. The use of “ordered ministries” emphasizes that persons called to ordained service in the church differ in function only, and not status, from other church members: “The basic form of ministry is the ministry of the whole people of God, from whose midst some are called to ordered ministries, to fulfill particular functions” (G-2.0101). By contrast, the term “church officers,” it is argued, presents a more hierarchical connotation of ministry. Similarly, by replacing “minister of the Word and Sacrament” with the term “teaching elder,” the unique and historic Presbyterian principle of parity in governance between the clergy and ruling elders is underscored. (Indeed, even the word “clergy,” with its connotations of special status and privilege, is out of place in historic Presbyterian polity, which asserts that the biblical word “elder” (“presbyteros”) embraces both those exercising the role of governance and pastor to the flock.) The term “teaching elder” has been used as the preferred term for those exercising the pastoral function in the Church in various historic streams of our current denomination, most recently in the *Book of Church Order* of the former Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) prior to its reunion with the UPCUSA in 1983.⁷

An overture by the Presbytery of Santa Fe to amend the *Book of Order* was introduced to the 221st General Assembly in 2016. This amendment to the constitution would change the title for ordained ministers back to Minister of the Word and Sacrament. By June of 2017, a majority of the presbyteries had voted to approve the change. The rationale for changing it back included the following statement.

⁶ The actual overtures to the General Assembly and their rationales are archived digitally on www.pc-biz.org.

⁷ www.pc-biz.org/#/search/2263

Vocational ministry encompasses many functions. There is, of course, a “teaching” aspect, but even there the current terminology of “spiritual formation” may better convey the reality of what is intended for “teachers” of the gospel. A primary focus on the “teaching” role can too easily direct us toward old tendencies of focusing on the intellect at the expense of the heart and habits of life. It also raises the question of how the designation “teaching elder” encompasses the pastoral aspect of the vocational minister’s function.

Another, presumably unintended, consequence of the change to “teaching elder” from “minister of the Word and Sacrament” is that the emphasis on “teaching” may too easily focus on “the Word” at the expense of “Sacrament.” Presbyterians assert a balance of “Word” and “Sacrament” but in practice we have often emphasized the “Word” to the neglect of “Sacrament.” The former designation of “minister of the Word and Sacrament” constantly reminds us of the intended balance, and hopefully of the importance of experiencing the “sacred mysteries” of the faith in conjunction with our study and reasoning.

The role of a vocational minister is to minister the Word and the Sacraments to and with the people of God. The minister does this not, primarily, as a social worker, or psychologist, or administrator, or (even) teacher. The minister’s primary function is to bring the Word and the Sacraments to the community of faith “truly” and “rightly” so that they may be used by the Holy Spirit to do God’s work within and among us. Thus, the title “minister of Word and Sacrament” conveys—not only to those who bear the office, but to members of the community of faith, and even to those with no church affiliation—a clearer descriptive summary of what the role and function is.⁸

I supported this change back to the title of Ministry of the Word and Sacrament because I was concerned about what the change meant for the role of preaching in the denomination. The issue goes deeper than simply a change in title. Shakespeare was right when he penned “that which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet;”⁹ but in this case there is more than semantics at work. I believe there is a deeper theological issue to be addressed. While the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) does believe in the priesthood of all believers, we also believe that there are many gifts of the Spirit and that they are given accordingly (1 Cor. 12:4-11). Is preaching—the proclamation of the

⁸ <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/6328>

⁹ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, The Works of William Shakespeare (USA: Walter J. Black, Inc. , 1937), 1937.

gospel—a gift given by the Spirit, or is it a skill that any person can master? Are we diminishing the role of the pastor as minister of the Word in the changes recommended in 2010 and are we moving further away from biblical preaching and proclamation? Is the title Minister of the Word and Sacrament merely a title and no longer a statement of an essential tenet of the Reformed faith? Does this change reflect the misconception in the world that the Bible is no longer relevant, and that preaching is merely one task to be accomplished on a weekly checklist?

If clergy are to take seriously the call to proclaim the gospel in preaching, then we need to address the question of why we preach. As the rationale quoted above states, we are first and foremost called to the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind. Do we as ministers take that calling seriously in our theological education and in our theology of ministry? What is our theology of preaching both as individual clergy and as a denomination?

Justification and Rationale

My first encounter with the change to the title of Teaching Elder was not a positive one. I was distressed by the change. I had worked hard in seminary and through our ordination process to receive the title “Minister of the Word and Sacrament”. I took pride in that title. My initial response to the change in title was originally based in my own vanity but it led me to deeper reflection. What was it about the term “word and sacrament” that meant so much to me and to others in the denomination? Why was it important to our roles as pastors? Was this identity crisis one of my own making or was there more to it than personal preferences and pride?

My answer came from the prologue to John's Gospel. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).¹⁰ The word we are called to preach is not just any word. It is *the Word*. The capitalization of word in the title "Minister of the Word and Sacrament" is not just a grammatical statement. It was and is a theological statement. Those of us called to this vocation are called to preach the Word that is Christ. We cannot do so if we are not intentional in understanding what we preach (the gospel) and why we preach it. In the *Book of Order*, the first great end of the church is "the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind."¹¹ This statement is the why of preaching, but in order to understand what it really means we have to return to the idea that preaching is proclamation of the Word and that at its heart, preaching is theological.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is dealing with an identity crisis. This crisis has been going on for several decades. The loss of membership, decline in resources and an increasingly consumerist culture has led some of us in the body to view pastoral ministry as a Jack-of-all-trades. The Master of Divinity program at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary (my alma mater) describes its purpose on their website as:

The essential skills for a lifetime of ministry are woven into the Master of Divinity curriculum. Theology, biblical studies, ethics, world religion, pastoral care, preaching, worship, Christian education, and mission and evangelism are combined with practical ministry experience in real-world settings. You will graduate equipped for imaginative and winsome leadership for a variety of pastoral contexts.¹²

¹⁰ All quotations of Scripture will be from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible unless otherwise indicated.

¹¹ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Part II the Book of Order*, 5.

¹² www.austinseminary.edu/page.cfm?p=1270

The course requirements include one class in preaching and two courses in theology. A glance at the course catalogue reveals a variety of elective topics from hymnody to congregation planning and visioning, as well as workshops in church administration. The offered elective preaching courses focus on sermon writing and presentation, but there is no mention of the “why” of preaching. There is no description that reflects thinking theologically about preaching as proclamation. Is there an assumption (by those who established the curriculum for the degree of Master of Divinity) that thinking theologically about preaching occurs naturally? Does the exegetical step of looking at theological references in regards to the Scripture passages encompass a theology of preaching? Are we moving away from seeing preaching as a key part of pastoral leadership or is this a type of benign neglect? In our attempts to “be all things to all people” has proclamation been overshadowed by the more practical aspects of ministry? As we as a denomination move toward viewing the pastor as office administrator, strategic planner, and chief financial officer of a non-profit organization are we losing our identity as ministers of Word and Sacrament?

In my current role as the Stated Clerk for Mission Presbytery (a mid-level judicatory position), I hear the same worries and concerns regarding decline that I heard during seventeen years of parish ministry. Clergy and lay leaders alike clamor for more resources on how to get people in the doors. Pre-presbytery meeting workshops on how to revitalize the church have the highest attendance of any workshops we offer. Church development focuses on creating different entry points into our buildings by adding in different community and service programs, and if preaching is mentioned at all it is to

encourage pastors to be creative and entertaining.¹³ We keep providing resources and programs, yet in many places the problem of decline persists. I began to wonder if the congregational leadership is focusing on the right questions. Perhaps people are looking for something more substantial than spiritual coffee and donuts and are seeking that bread of life, “Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty’” (John 6:35). Is providing the same programs as a local community center or Boys and Girls Club the salvation of the church as we know it? How does the work we now do reflect that great end of the church to proclaim the gospel?

In 2015, Patheos.com¹⁴ posted a letter from a millennial in its “Ponder Anew” blog. The letter generated a lot of conversation from all sides. It captured the post-modern reality in which we live and which the church as a whole has yet to grasp. It was a strong indictment of the attempts of some in church leadership (often at least thirty years or older) to reach out to younger generations. It also challenged many of the assumptions made about the millennial generation where faith is concerned.

The author of the blog speaks specifically of millennials—I would argue that his statements reflect those who are post-modern in thinking regardless of age –when he says, “Just be the church. Be yourself.”¹⁵ He states that people are looking for the

¹³ At the October 2017 meeting of Mission Presbytery in Corpus Christi, TX, the report given by the Church Development and Evangelism Committee focused on one church’s efforts to grow. The pastor speaking at the time informed the body that sermons are a form of entertainment and challenged pastors to focus on such.

¹⁴ Patheos.com is a website for the engagement in global dialogue about religion and spirituality, and to explore and experience the world's beliefs.

¹⁵ www.patheos.com/blogs/ponderanew/2015/05/13/dear-church-an-open-letter-from-one-of-the-millennials-you-cant-figure-out/

authentic, genuine voice of the gospel. I suspect this statement is about preaching as well as being about worship styles. Craig Satterlee addresses the issue in this way:

The problem comes when we become so focused on ourselves that preachers worry too much about how well they preach, parishioners judge a message's value solely according to what they get out of it, and Christians insist on having every answer and knowing exactly what to say before they will utter a word about Jesus. When this happens, the voice of Christ, the power and wisdom of God, which is the real speaking in proclamation never gets heard.

The church finds power and wisdom in trusting that when Scripture is read in worship, when sermons are preached in church, and when faith is shared in the ordinary and extraordinary moments of life, ultimately God is doing the talking. The church also finds power and wisdom by expecting that God has something worthwhile to say.¹⁶

In order to be authentic in our preaching we need to shift our focus to once again seeing preaching as proclamation of the gospel, and we have to know what we preach (Scripture) and why we preach it (theology). Theology is the study of God and preaching is the proclamation of the Word that is God. If we as a denomination can explore what this means, then we can recapture the call to proclaim the good news to all people.

Project Description

The thesis hopes to do two things. First it hopes to continue the conversation of how theology is the basis of homiletical efforts. Second, the thesis aims to encourage clergy and lay preachers to not place preaching on the back burner of pastoral duties. If we, in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), are called Ministers of the Word, then we must develop our ideas of what it means to proclaim the Word that is from God as found in Scripture.

¹⁶ Craig A. Satterlee, *When God Speaks through Worship* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2009), 114.

This thesis is written in the essay model and will report on the findings using a very Presbyterian style of reflection. I began in Chapter Three with an exploration of Scripture for the basis of our call. I then looked at the confessional documents found in the *Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and historical writings of theologians regarding proclamation in order to form a solid argument for the intentional relationship between theology and preaching. This exploration included contemporary theological thought regarding proclamation in preaching.

Tom Long encourages preachers to continually develop their own theology for preaching.¹⁷ Likewise, O. Wesley Allen, Jr. writes in his essay on revelation: “Preachers need to be intentional about shaping their approach to the tension between divine transcendence and immanence; their valuation of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience; and the way their Christological orientation influences a theological understanding of revelation.”¹⁸ This thesis will include a theology for preaching based on the studies listed above, as well as reflection on my own theological beliefs regarding proclamation. This theology will include sections on the following topics: the Sovereignty of God, Jesus as the Incarnate Word, the Word in the Spirit, Scripture as the Reliable Witness, Justification by Grace, the Priesthood of All Believers, Proclamation and the Sacraments, and the Power of Proclamation.

This theological statement will be the basis of an assessment of two sermons written by the thesis author on the same Scripture passage in order to show how a

¹⁷ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 62-63.

¹⁸ O. Wesley Allen Jr., “Revelation,” in *The New Interpreter's Handbook of Preaching*, ed. Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 474.

homelitical theology helps ministers to sharpen their preaching and focus on proclamation. The first sermon was written before the theology of preaching was developed. The second sermon was written after that theology was developed. I will use a set of questions to analyze the two sermons: What is the focus of the sermon? What was its function? What theological themes appear in this sermon? How is the sermon proclamation? Where is the gospel in the sermon? The questions will be specific to the theology of preaching found in Chapter Four of this thesis. The analysis will also explore any paradoxes or contradictions found in both sermons based on the developed theology. In comparing and contrasting the two sermons, I hope to show how an intentional theology of proclamation informs and shapes biblical preaching that is authentic to the proclamation of the Word of God.

Finally, this thesis will include a reflection on the learnings and growth of the author that have resulted from this project. It will also include some ideas on how the findings of this thesis can be used to introduce or re-introduce ministers to the idea of proclamation and how to develop their own homelitical theologies.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

In his book, *The Bible in the Pulpit: The Renewal of Biblical Preaching*, Leander Keck makes a statement that has become a fulfilled prophecy. “Both the *misuse* of the Bible and its *disuse* have serious consequences for the health of Christianity.”¹⁹ Trends in preaching have focused on the “hows” of preaching more than the why. Michael Pasquarello III responds to this trend in his book *Christian Preaching*. Pasquarello traces the roots of this focus on the style of sermons back even to the Reformation and the rise of nationalism. As the church moved out of the secular, political realm of power, there was a separation of divine things from those of the world. This separation continued and has appeared to have widened in the postmodern era.

Yet, for many contemporary preachers, the forms of preaching that are most familiar—the inheritance of late modernity—have been separated from a divine-human conversation that is mediated through the light of scriptural witness, theological memory, moral wisdom and eschatological hope. ... A particularly corrosive effect of this separation has been an increasingly anthropocentric emphasis in preaching that is reflected in excessive self-consciousness and dependence on communication skills, style, techniques, innovate methods, and personality of the preacher, and a correlative preoccupation with likes, preferences, opinions, and “deeply felt needs” of the listener.²⁰

¹⁹ Leander E. Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit : The Renewal of Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 31.

²⁰ Michael Pasquarello III, *Christian Preaching: A Trinitarian Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), 14.

Pasquarello calls for a return to a focus on the purpose of preaching. “At its heart, preaching is the human articulation of the speech of God, the gospel, through which the Spirit is actively gathering up all things in heaven and on earth under the lordship of Christ for the praise and glory of the Father.”²¹ The purpose of preaching has taken a back seat to style and form. Eugene Lowry confesses to struggling with such temptation in the first chapter of *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery*.

Remembering Lucy Rose’s identification of four content variables in preaching—*purpose, content, language, and shape*—I believe it is time to engage each one of them. The problem is what should come first? ... Frankly, I would prefer to quickly move to the issue of shape and to explore “how to do it” questions, but at this moment on our journey we may need first to figure out what we will be attempting to shape.²²

In *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach*, Lenora Tubbs Tisdale focuses more on how to prepare congregations to hear prophetic sermons and how to respond to them, than on the theological why for such preaching. Even so, the theology does appear in snippets throughout the book.

There is a rich soil of writings that focus on the purpose of preaching that has been tilled throughout the years. As Keck reminds us, the role of preaching is to preach the Bible – not to preach about, but to preach it. Preaching the Bible is proclamation. “... a biblical sermon is not a book report. It is a proclamation of what has been heard in and through the text”.²³ Writing during a time when the focus was on the historical Jesus and somehow proving that the Bible was factually true, Keck responds by stating, “... the first questions are not, Did this happen the way it was reported? but rather, Why was this

²¹ Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit*, 46.

²² Eugene L. Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 28.

²³ Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit*, 55.

story told?”²⁴ For Keck, the purpose of preaching is proclamation of the gospel and the preacher is a:

journeyman theologian in order to preach from the Bible. The view of biblical preaching advocated here implies not only that the preacher will be a serious exegete but also a serious theologian—one who ponders and probes rudimentary affirmations of the Christian faith in light of human life until they become clear and convincing.²⁵

Gerhard Forde explains the idea of proclamation more fully in *Theology Is for Proclamation*. Forde defines proclamation as “the explicit declaration of the good news, the gospel, the kerygma.”²⁶ This declaration is not a one-time event that occurred in the past that we now study and reflect upon from afar.

Almost from the start the gospel proclamation tended to lose its present tense. It was thought that the eternal Logos made a one-time appearance, came down, acquired a body, was crucified and raised, and then absconded with his body, never to be heard from again. The heavens were silent, the great acts of God were over and done with, and there were no more prophets. Jesus become, in today’s parlance, “history,” past tense. The good news became old news. The only place where present tense survived in some fashion was in the sacraments ... Meanwhile, the discourse of the church, its proclamation, become more and more just secondary, past tense discourse about God and his Christ.²⁷

For Forde the idea that God’s acts were somehow relegated to the past led to preaching as a secondary discourse where the preacher talked about God’s love instead of declaring that God is love.²⁸ Theology and exegesis should not supplant proclamation. Preaching is not a theological treatise. Theology helps us to understand the acts of God so we can

²⁴ Ibid., 130.

²⁵ Ibid., 140.

²⁶ Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 1.

²⁷ Ibid., 6.

²⁸ Ibid., 4-5.

proclaim them. “If we are to proclaim and not merely explain God, what are we to say? In speaking of God it is important to start with the very first principle: What is to be proclaimed is what God has decided, in fact, to do.”²⁹

The theological concept of preaching as proclamation is not new to the 20th or 21st centuries. Richard Lischer compiles writings about preaching from theologians throughout the history of Christianity. Each of the writers answers the question of why we preach with some form of proclamation. Alan of Lille provides us with a clear distinction between teaching and preaching. “Preaching is that instruction which is offered to many, in public, and for their edification. Teaching is that which is given to one or to many to add to their knowledge.”³⁰ This distinction expresses one of the concerns I had when the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) changed the title for clergy from Minister of Word and Sacrament to teaching elder. The idea of emphasizing the preacher as teacher has been done partially in response to the question of how to preach to the so-called biblically illiterate in today’s world. In her essay in *Questions Preachers Ask*, Gail R. O’Day challenges this notion as a trap the preacher can fall into. “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.”³¹

The theology of preaching—the why—has a significant role to play in proclamation. In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine in the fourth century A.D. points out that,

²⁹ Ibid., 30.

³⁰ Alan of Lille, “The Seventh Rung,” in *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom of Preaching, Augustine to the Present*, ed. Richard Lischer (USA: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 4.

³¹ *Questions Preachers Ask: Essays in Honor of Thomas G. Long*, ed. Ted A. Smith Scott Black Johnston, and Lenora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 4.

“Whoever, then, thinks that he understand the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this two-fold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought.”³² The act of reflection on who God is and how God acts is important to the proclamation of the gospel. Two centuries later this same thought is expressed in David Schnasa Jacobsen’s collection of essays, *Homiletical Theology: Preaching as Doing Theology*. Stricklen Eisenlohr writes, “The theology that preachers do involves discerning the living word from the living Lord that longs to be spoken into specific contexts at particular moments in time.”³³

David Schnasa Jacobsen uses the term homiletical theology as the way in which preachers are bringing theology back into the practice of preaching. “...preaching is not about consuming theology, but a place where theology is ‘done’, or produced. In doing so, it aims to concretize a commitment to seeing preaching as a thoroughgoing theological act, relating deeply to its practice, theories, and contexts.”³⁴ Homiletical theology puts proclamation back to the forefront not only as something we do but as something that occurs outside of us—a gift of the Spirit.

The gift of speech, proclamation, is a gift of the Spirit. The object of study for homiletical theology, the spoken word, would be nonexistent and more definitely impotent without the Spirit’s work in our mouths. The proclaimed gospel is not something of our own creation. Proclamation is a word from outside and beyond us that comes to us and fills us to speak from our particular selves but not about ourselves.³⁵

Pasquarello concurs in his essay stating that the Spirit is an integral part of proclamation.

³² Augustine, “On Christian Doctrine,” (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2009), 26.

³³ David Schnasa Jacobsen, ed. *Homiletical Theology: Preaching as Doing Theology* (Eugene, Washington: Cascade Books, 2015), 155.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

Even theologians are dependent upon the Spirit in their work, since every attempt at interpretation, every attempt to speak God's word with human words remains a prayer, a plea for the Holy Spirit who grants understanding, preaching, and hearing, a plea which begs, *Veni Spiritu: come Holy Spirit!*³⁶

In his essay for the same book, Ronald J. Allen writes that homiletical theology marks a culture shift in the view of preaching.

Not long ago, many theologians and preachers regarded preaching as a consumed discipline ... Scholars of preaching today have almost universally rejected the consumer viewpoint, and now think of preaching from start to finish, as a theological act with preaching's own theological creative dimensions.³⁷

In the postmodern era, the shift from institutional authority has actually strengthened the need for proclamation. The authority people look to is authenticity and the distrust of institutional knowledge as truth has opened the door for preaching that is grounded in proclamation. In his article for "Insights—A Journal of the Faculty of Austin Seminary," Scott Black Johnston encourages preachers to embrace the uncertainty of postmodernism.

Uncertainty plays an important role in at least two key areas of homiletical theory. First, an attitude of uncertainty helps to "rein in" theological positivism. An appropriate posture of homiletical uncertainty will caution preachers against thinking that they exert complete control over their preaching and the meaning of their words. To concede this degree of uncertainty is to allow that God will be involved in the preaching enterprise in unforeseen ways.³⁸

Lynette Cragge addresses the connection between authenticity and biblical preaching in her dissertation. This authenticity in preaching is rooted in the theology of preaching.

Theology students spend enormous amounts of time learning techniques for preaching, so much so that wondering about God and what God is doing gets

³⁶ Ibid., 112.

³⁷ Ibid., 130.

³⁸ Scott Black Johnston, "Uncertain Revelations: The Dilemma of the Postmodern Preacher," *Insights: A Journal of the Faculty of Austin Seminary* Spring, no. 110 (1995): 57.

overwhelmed as one attends to the physical acts of sermon writing and preaching. The Biblical preacher benefits from spending some time thinking about why they want to preach in the first place and how the call to preach might be influenced ontologically.³⁹

Theology and proclamation can play a significant role in postmodern preaching as Dale Patterson explored in his thesis, *Do We Have Nothing to Say? Preaching in a Post-modern Paradigm*.

We speak our witness from a biblical platform not because the Bible is a written book, but because as those words proclaimed are vivified through the work of the Holy Spirit it connects us with our ultimate authority, not the book, but the person, and that person is Jesus Christ. The confidence from this authority is not that we know, or are certain, as in the sun will rise again tomorrow morning, but we have confidence in their author, the one from whom the good news springs forth.⁴⁰

David Lose addresses the challenges of preaching in the postmodern era in his book, *Preaching at the Crossroads*. Lose also sees opportunities for proclamation in this time of institutional distrust and the weakening of the metanarrative.

When it comes to *postmodernism*, the primary question is *epistemological*: How do we know for certain whether anything is true? Hence, the primary challenge that postmodernism presents is whether we can speak honestly and intelligibly about truths in a world of competing truth claims....But the possibility latent in such loss is the rediscovery of a vibrant faith that rests not on objective data but on the confessions, truth claims, and shared experiences of the Christian community.⁴¹

For Lose, the answers lie in seeing preaching as confessional. We can no longer stand on the phrase, “The Bible says it, I believe it” for the basis of preaching. Instead we ought to

³⁹ Lynette Crage, “A Study of Hope: The Role of Biblical Preaching in Shaping Interpretation of the Authority of Scripture” (DMin Thesis, Luther Seminary, 2011), 49.

⁴⁰ Dale Patterson, “Do We Have Nothing to Say? Preaching in a Post-Modern Paradigm” (Dmin Thesis, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 2001), 45-46.

⁴¹ David J. Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World—and Our Preaching—Is Changing* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 7.

explore our own theological beliefs to find the central core truths we believe all of Scripture speaks to. Lose calls this *sachlerilik*, where we no longer look behind the text to find its meaning in the cultural, historical interpretations of its time or beyond the text to other sources, but to the center of the text. Scripture from the center,

takes what is more clear and central in the Bible as an interpretive lens, or hermeneutic, by which to read all of Scripture. It thereby offers the means to transcend the postmodern interpretative morass by applying a theological, or material, criterion by which to interpret the “meaning” of various passages.⁴²

Lose pushes back against the argument that such a practice leads to a rigidity of absolutes through proof-texting to prove our own biases, or the tendency to reject texts that do fit with our personal views. Instead he contends that such a practice can open us to a deeper, more open type of proclamation.

To enter into this conversation, we not only need to be intentionally honest about our convictions, but must also name them as such. That is, we must confess what we believe to be the heart of the biblical witness, rather than attempting to prove it once and for all. By confessing one’s interpretive center, interpreters and preachers avoid the totalizing and aggressive penchant of modern interpretation, where every differing interpretation is a rival for the one, true approach. At the same time, confessing one’s hermeneutical assumptions, allows preachers to retain the strength of their convictions, thus avoiding the despair and confusion of postmodern interpretation, where every interpretation is equally a matter of self-projection.

This kind of vulnerable disclosure (for confessing, rather than proving one’s position always entails the possibility for disagreement and rejection) not only provides a key to reclaiming a vibrant understanding of interpretation but also invites a more communal and conversational approach to the task of proclamation.⁴³

Fred Craddock stresses the importance of a theological understanding for preaching before moving on to the tasks of exegesis and sermon preparation.

⁴² Ibid., 36-37.

⁴³ Ibid., 40.

Preaching is both words and the Word. To deny any relationship between one's own words and the Word of God, whether due to one's notion of proper humility or to an abdication of the authority and responsibility of ministry, is to rob preaching of its place and purpose...to identify one's own words with the Word of God is to assume for ourselves God's role in preaching...the preacher takes the words provided by culture and tradition, selects from among them those that have the qualities of clarity, vitality, and appropriateness, arrange them so as to convey a task and evoke intent, pronounces them according to the accepted usage, and offers them to God in the sermon. It is God who fashions words into the Word.⁴⁴

Craddock brings theology into what was called the New Homiletic rather than removing it.

Preaching, regardless of style or form, is a theological act of proclamation. Preaching brings Scripture forward in a living voice in the congregation. Biblical texts have a future as well as a past, and preaching seeks to fulfill that future by continuing the conversation of the text into the present.⁴⁵

He says further that what people yearn for is "a word that is from beyond ourselves."⁴⁶ In proclamation preachers are helping bring forth that word in a unique way. "The desire is not to find but to be found, not to know but to be known."⁴⁷ In *As One Without Authority*, Craddock describes this way of preaching as incarnational. "...as the Word came in the flesh, so the Word comes in the form of human speech."⁴⁸

Stephen Webb explains this further in his book, *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound*. God's voice is holy. It is the divine voice that creates all including the human ability to speak, and in doing so, we are able to join in the Creator's song.

⁴⁴ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 18-19.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Fred B. Craddock, *As One without Authority*, 3rd edition ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 46.

We can add our voices to the divine harmony because we were created in God's image. Theologically construed, speaking is not a trait projected upon God by analogy to human experience. We do not speak first and then think about God as speaking too. On the contrary, we can speak only because God created us to be hearers of God's Word. We are created in God's image, but that image is more like an echo than a mirror. God spoke us into being so that we too might have the joy of sharing in the spoken Word.⁴⁹

Webb later describes this idea of sharing in the Word in the story of the Annunciation (Luke 2:26-38, 46-56). He points out that Mary is not a submissive character in the story. She does not just meekly accept the words that are proclaimed to her.

Moreover, when she hears the Word she responds in song, proclaiming God's majesty in the Magnificat. Rather than demonstrating the passivity of hearing ... Mary shows how intimately connected the Word is to the body and how speech-filled hearing naturally leads to proclamation.⁵⁰

Likewise, Tom Long points out that the purpose of preaching is not to provide a forum for the preacher's voice, but is an "occasions for the hearing of a voice beyond the preacher's voice—the very word of the living God".⁵¹ Even though his book was written almost thirty years ago, Long addresses what is still the ongoing trend of issue-oriented preaching over biblical preaching.

The task of preaching is not to set out some reality of life and then go to the Bible to find extra wisdom. It is instead to tell the story of the Bible so clearly that it calls into question and ultimately redefines what we think we know of reality and what we call wisdom in the first place.⁵²

⁴⁹ Stephen H. Webb, *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 15.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵¹ Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 25.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 35.

This happens because the Word of God is then the voice of the living God. “It is not the Word of God in the abstract but of God who is for us, of God who is against us in order to be truly for us.”⁵³

The connection between the Word of God and the spoken word (preaching) is explored in Chris Currie’s book on the three-fold Word of God found in Karl Barth’s theology.

Though proclamation and Scripture are derivative forms of the Word of God, they are nevertheless forms that point to the reality of God’s presence and self-revelation in Christ, and in their witness as herald and witness of past revelation, they become part of the one extent in which God continues to speak to the world through the life and witness of the Christian community.⁵⁴

It is in proclamation that the Word moves again among us. “...through Scripture and proclamation, the church serves as a contemporary form and sign of Christ’s presence on earth in the time between the times”.⁵⁵

From Augustine to David Buttrick, as found in Richard Lischer’s collection of writings on preaching over the centuries, those involved in the theology of preaching focus on it as proclamation.

In preaching, we put together Christian understandings with images of lived experience. In doing so, preaching demonstrates that our Christian convictions are true to life. Preaching does not trade in formal proofs, or argued syllogisms. If, in sermons, we turn to rational proofs, we will elevate reason to a position of ultimacy instead of faith-consciousness.⁵⁶

⁵³ Ibid., 55.

⁵⁴ Thomas Christian Currie, *The Only Sacrament Left to Us: The Threefold Word of God in the Theology and Ecclesiology of Karl Barth* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 45.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁶ David Buttrick, “Designing Moves,” in *The Company of Preachers*, ed. Richard Lischer (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 342.

Preaching is the proclamation of the good news of God's acts in the world. Preaching is not a lecture about historical events. It is not moral advice, religious instruction or a motivational speech. While all these can be effects of a sermon, it's intent should always be proclamation as emphasized by Gardner C. Taylor.

How we approach our preaching responsibility depends on whether we consider proclamation of the gospel to be a matter of life or death. If we who preach go up into pulpits in order to pass on some interesting observations, or to deliver some practical, beneficial homilies, or to issue some bulletins about the society's latest crisis, that is one thing. If we look upon ourselves as heralds of the great king; bearers, minus foolish and immodest preening, to the hearts of humans beings of that upon which turns the eternal health or the fatal sickness of people in their private and corporate lives, then we shall see our work as preachers as something else again.⁵⁷

Karl Barth also saw the role of the preacher as a type of herald. We don't just retell a dead story or the story with a set end. "Preaching has the task of proclaiming the past and future revelation of God, the epiphany and parousia of Jesus Christ."⁵⁸

Proclamation in preaching is a way in which the kingdom of God breaks into the world, "The task of the sermon is to create space for the Word of God..."⁵⁹

When the Bible is understood thus as witness to God's Word, as witness to a decision, an act of God, then it seems impossible to begin examining the text that has just been read and academically studied in search of its theme, or *scopus*. The answer to such questions would be that throughout the Bible there is only one single theme, namely, God's one Word, his revelation, Jesus Christ himself.⁶⁰

Preaching is the proclamation of the Word of God found in the biblical text spoken anew for new ears.

⁵⁷ Gardner C. Taylor, "Portrait of a Propeht," in *The Company of Preachers*, ed. Richard Lischer (USA: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. , 2002), 105.

⁵⁸ Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster/J. Knox Press, 1991), 86.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

If the preacher takes seriously the role of proclamation found in the biblical texts and how it is heard today, then the task of crafting the sermon takes on new importance. If we do not take it seriously, then our sermons will not be proclamation of the good news. Walter Bruggemann addresses the problem in this way:

The gospel is too readily heard and taken for granted, as though it contained no unsettling news and no unwelcome threat. What began as news in the gospel is easily assumed, slotted, and conveniently dismissed. We depart having heard, but without noticing the urge to transformation that is not readily compatible with our comfortable believing that asks little and receives less.

The gospel is thus a truth widely held, but a truth greatly reduced. It is a truth that has been flattened, trivialized, and rendered inane.⁶¹

Bruggemann sees poetic speech as the way proclamation can happen. It is the way in which the preacher invites the hearer into a reality that is different than the one the world presents to us. We are shown the kingdom of God, which is not just an alternate form of reality but one in which our existence is shaped by the gospel.⁶² “The preacher is called to weave an artistic connection between the text in its elusive, liberated truth, and the congregation in its propensity to hear the text in form and reductionism.”⁶³ He explains this idea in his article in *Struggling in Scripture*. Scripture tends to set us off balance when we attempt to reduce it to mere narrative or an historical account because it is always news. “It always, inescapably, outdistances our categories of understanding and explanation, of interpretation, and control. Because the Bible is, as we confess, ‘the live

⁶¹ Walter Bruggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 1.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 13.

word of the living God,' it will not submit in any compliant way to the accounts we prefer to give it."⁶⁴

Proclamation is a risky endeavor. It looks not only backwards at what God has done, it also looks around to see what God is doing now and it looks forward to see what God can and will do. Because it calls us forward, preaching as proclamation is only static in one way: its focus on the biblical texts. Even when we consider the ears of the congregation, we cannot create a one-size-fits-all type of sermon, but all sermons can and should preach the living gospel that is found in all Scripture. Mark Allan Powell asserts

In the Bible itself, the Word of God is an active, dynamic force that never returns void but accomplishes for which it is sent (Isa. 55:11). The Word of God does things: it cleanses, it heals, it creates, it judges, it saves. Thus, we should be pleased if our parishioners come to the Bible with a hope or even an expectation that it will do to them what the Word of God does: affirm them, rebuke them, comfort them, frighten them.⁶⁵

The challenge for preachers is to understand proclamation as the theological act we do, to see and express its sacramental nature so that it becomes the first thing we do rather than the last. Preaching that does not see itself as theological can be reduced to entertainment or a collection of sound bites easily tweeted to the world with no real impact. Without intentional, theological thought, preaching is no more than another style of rhetoric. But when we see the connection between theology and proclamation, then preaching itself becomes proclamation. "The task of the preacher can therefore be

⁶⁴ Walter Bruggemann, "Biblical Authority: A Personal Reflection," in *Struggling with Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 5.

⁶⁵ Mark Allan Powell, *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap between Pulpit & Pew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 98.

summed up as thus: to reproduce in thought that one unique event, the gift of God's grace."⁶⁶

Summary

In summary, I found the works of the following authors provocative in pursuing my thesis topic. Gerhard Forde's firm focus on the theology of proclamation crosses denominational lines and reveals that proclamation is a foundation for the universal church. Karl Barth's work on preaching Scripture continues to play an important role for proclamation as he explores the relationship between exegetical study and preaching. Leander Keck spoke of what would happen to proclamation if ministers moved away from biblical preaching, and his concerns are reflected in the current trends for preaching. Tom Long's insight on the need for preachers to develop theologies for preaching inspired this thesis. David Lose and Michael Pasquarello both speak into the topic of proclamation that rose to the surface as we entered the 21st century and continues to be discussed as we come to the close of its second decade.

It is interesting to note that writings by Presbyterians were minimal in this area (with the exception of Tom Long). Most of the literature on the theology of preaching came from other denominations (Lutheran, Episcopalian, and Methodist, to name a few). I suspect this is another symptom of the Presbyterian Church's lack of focus on homelitical theology in order to focus on the structures and styles of preaching.

⁶⁶ Karl Barth, "Preaching, Revelation, and the Church," in *The Company of Preachers*, ed. Richard Lischer (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 428.

CHAPTER THREE

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Introduction

In this chapter, I will explore the theological rationale for preaching as proclamation. Before we can look at a rationale for preaching as proclamation, we need to define it. Preaching as proclamation is biblical preaching that declares who God is, what God has done, and what God will continue to do. Proclamation does not preach about Jesus Christ, but preaches Christ. In proclamation we preach into the biblical text rather than about the text, and this proclamation of the Word of God is what people long to hear. "...hearts and minds yearn for a word that is from beyond ourselves. Many are weary of self-centeredness, weary of being consumers of good sermons. The desire is not to find but to be found, not to know but to be known."⁶⁷ Proclamation is preaching that word that is beyond ourselves.

In the Presbyterian tradition, we look first to Scripture, then to our confessional statements (as found in the *Book of Confessions*), and then to other sources. I will follow that tradition in this chapter.

⁶⁷ Craddock, *Preaching*, 44.

Scriptural Basis for Proclamation

From the very beginning proclamation has been key to the relationship between God and the world. “Then God spoke...” (Genesis 1:ff). It is not the hand of God that creates, it is the voice or the word of God. According to the prologue to John’s Gospel, this Word, *logos*, is not a written word, but a spoken and active word. God speaks a word and life bursts forth. God says, “Let there be...” and the cosmos takes shape. The Word of God is God in action. Indeed, throughout Scripture God is heard, not seen. Even Moses only sees the back of God (Exodus 33:17-23) and Isaiah sees only the hem of God’s robe (Isaiah 6:1). God’s relationship to the people is created and sustained through God’s voice. God speaks to Abraham, calling him and his family into a new relationship with God. The Word of the Lord comes to Abram and establishes the covenant. “[God] brought him outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be’” (Genesis 15:5-6). The covenant was not written in stone. It was spoken and Abraham believed it.

The story of the Exodus—the story of a new relationship between God and the people—begins when the divine name is spoken and heard. Moses hears a voice calling his name. That voice declares, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exodus 3:6). When Moses asks who he should say this god is, God answers, “I AM WHO I AM.” God then goes on to say, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14). The divine name is spoken. Just as the Word of God created in the beginning, the Word will shape this liberated people into a new community. In Exodus 32, God speaks to Moses, giving him the laws and statutes to turn this loose confederate of tribes into a community based on faith.

We also see a shift in the Exodus story from God speaking directly to individuals (although that will still occur in other biblical texts) to people being called to speak for God. These prophets are called to speak for God, not about God. “Then the Lord said to [Moses], ‘Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?’” (Exodus 4:11). It is still God’s word that will be spoken through the speech of others. God speaks to Moses and Aaron, “Say to Pharaoh...” “say to the house of Jacob...” (Exodus 5-13). Proclamation of the Word played a role in the liberation of Israel from slavery. “You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his land” (Exodus 7:2). The Israelites do not stop to erect a monument when they escaped across the Red Sea, instead they sing. “I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously, horse and rider he has thrown into the sea” (Exodus 15:16). Miriam, called a prophet, takes up the song and leads the women in proclaiming what God has done (Exodus 15:20-21).

Likewise, the prophets will speak the Word of God as given to them by God. They do not provide treatises on the person or nature of God. Even the prophets’ motivational speeches are the words of God.

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD’s
hand
double for all her sins.
A voice cries out:
“In the wilderness prepare the way of
the LORD,
and makes straight in the desert a highway
for our God” (Isaiah 40:1-3).

The voice of God speaks to the celestial audience and a voice calls out to the people.

When Jeremiah is called, he hears the Word of the Lord and he will speak God's words. "And the LORD said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth'" (Jeremiah 1:9). Throughout the book, Jeremiah says "The word of the LORD came to me..." (2:1, 7:1, 11:1, 14:1, 16:1, 18:1, 21:1, 26:1, 27:1, 30:1, 32:1, 32:6, 33:1, 34:1, 34:8, 35:1 and 35:12). This is not just a literary device to introduce a new chapter or story. It is a constant reminder that the words of the prophet are not his own. These are God's words and the role of the prophet is to proclaim them. The prophets all proclaim the Word often declaring "Thus says the Lord."

In the gospels we see another change in the way God's Word is revealed as "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14), but the Word of God is still revealed through proclamation. The word is brought to Zachariah, Mary, Joseph and the shepherds on the lips of angels. The voice is also heard at significant moments of affirmation. The voice from heaven that speaks at Christ's baptism and the transfiguration is the Word of God. This does not change the fact that Christ himself is the Word of God that abides with us in the incarnation. The people will no longer hear proclamations through a prophet, judge or king, but they will hear them through the very voice of God in Jesus Christ.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
 because he has anointed me
 to bring good news to the poor.
 He has sent me to proclaim release to
 the captives
 and recovery of sight to the blind,
 to let the oppressed go free,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19).

When Jesus says, "I say to you...", he is not expressing his sole opinion based on extensive study of the ancient texts, he is proclaiming the Word of God as the very Word of God. The "I am" statements in John's Gospel are proclamations of that divine name first revealed to Moses. When Philip asks to see God, Jesus replies,

Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I say to you I do not speak on my own, but the Father who dwells in me does his works (John 14:9-10).

To see and hear Christ is to see and hear God. In John's account of the resurrection, Mary recognizes Jesus not by sight, but by his voice when he speaks her name (John 20:16). In Matthew (28:6-8), Mark (16:6-7) and Luke (24:5-8), the resurrection is proclaimed to the women followed by the command (in Matthew and Mark) to go tell others. The Word of God cannot be silenced, even by the grave.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is also the gift of voice as the word of God is given again in a new way. "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come" (John 16:13). The Spirit enables the disciples to speak so they can be heard in different languages in order to be witnesses of the gospel—of the words of the living, speaking God—to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Paul's conversion does not happen because he is suddenly struck blind. It happens because he hears the voice and follows its call and commands. He then begins to "proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God'" (Acts 9:20). In the book of Acts it is not the apostles' acts that caused the uproar among others. It is the words that they speak. "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also. ... They are

all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus” (Acts 17:6-7). Those who were called by Christ to follow were called to proclaim the gospel.

While the epistles were written down, they too are proclamations of the gospel word. Paul opens his letters with the declaration that he is sent by the gospel of God, which is Jesus Christ (Romans 1:1, Galatians 1:1). These letters written by Paul and others contain instructions for the fledging and often conflicted communities of faith. But more importantly they contain the proclamation of the gospel over and over again.

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1-3).

Throughout Scripture, the word of God is proclaimed “so that our joy may be complete.” Scripture is the revelation of the Word of God, living, moving and speaking throughout time. This word was spoken at the beginning to create—to create a word, to create a new relationship with God, to create a new people and shape their lives together, and in the person of Christ, to create again a new way of being. This word was made manifest in Christ who sends disciples of every time and place to proclaim the word fresh again.

Reformed Theology and Proclamation

The authority of Scripture and the proclamation of the gospel were essentials of the Reformation, and continue to be so in the Reformed Tradition. For the early reformers, preaching should focus on proclaiming the gospel as found in Scripture. Reformers like Martin Luther emphasized the importance of Scripture in preaching.

When you open the book containing the Gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him.⁶⁸

John Calvin challenged the idea that preaching was superfluous or irrelevant because the word spoken by preachers came from a human voice and therefore could not be considered the Word of God. “For, among the many excellent gifts with which God has adorned the human race, it is a singular privilege that [God] designs to consecrate [God’s self] to the mouth and tongues of [these] in order that [God’s] voice may resound in them”.⁶⁹

In 1560 C.E., the Scottish Parliament declared Scotland a Protestant nation. They ratified a confession of faith, written by six clergymen (including John Knox), that secured the future of the Protestant church in Scotland. This confession would be the standard for the church until the Westminster Documents were adopted in 1647. *The Scots Confession* declared that the authority of Scripture was found within Scripture itself, as it was the true, authoritative witness of God.

The notes of the true Kirk, therefore, we believe, confess and avow to be: first, the true preaching of the Word of God, in which God has revealed himself to us, as the writings of the prophets and apostles declare; secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, with which must be associated the Word and promise of God to seal and confirm them in our hearts; and lastly, ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God’s Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and

⁶⁸ Martin Luther, “Proclamation Versus Moralism,” in *The Company of Preachers*, ed. Richard Lischer (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 118.

⁶⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, vol. Twenty-one, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1018.

virtue nourished.⁷⁰

Proclamation of the gospel was a key tenet of faith as found in further confessional documents of the time, including those adopted by the Presbyterian Church.

In *The Second Helvetic Confession* from Switzerland, Henrich Bullinger writes that preaching of the word of God (Scripture) is the word of God. “Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed....”⁷¹ *The Larger Catechism* of the Westminster Assembly (1643-1649) states that it is the word of God that is to be preached, and it is to be done “through diligence, preparation and prayer; examine what they hear by the Scriptures, receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind, as the Word of God....”⁷² The Westminster Documents (The Confession of Faith, the Larger Catechism, and the Shorter Catechism) were adopted by the Scottish church, and became the confessional standard for the Presbyterian Church in the United States. In these confessional standards, we see an importance placed not just on preaching, but on the preaching of the Word of God.

Later Confessional Statements of the Presbyterian Church

The statements of faith that were adopted by the PC(USA) in the modern and post-modern eras include some statements regarding preaching, but we begin to see a change as the documents begin to reflect more on specific issues of the day. *The Theological Declaration of Barmen* was written in opposition of the German Evangelical

⁷⁰ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Part 1: Book of Confessions*, (United States of America: The Office of the General Assembly, 2016), 19.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 5.004.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 7.270.

Church's accommodation of National Socialism in the 1930's. The Barmen declaration sought to address errors made by the German church, and the very first such error was the idea that the church should use other sources such as state-sanction propaganda for its preaching instead of the gospel.

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and beside the one Word of God, still other events and powers, figure and truths, as God's revelation.⁷³

The Barmen declaration holds fast to the idea that preaching is the proclamation of God's Word as found in Scripture. In the *Confession of 1967*, written for the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America,⁷⁴ we begin to see another change in the way in which preaching and the Scriptures are approached. This confession is about reconciliation and it takes a more open view of Scripture than the earlier confessions. It seeks to reconcile the area of literary and historical thought to the study of Scripture as well as the diversity of cultures.

The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ. The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the languages, thought forms, and literary features of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect the views of life, history, and the cosmos which was then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture.

God's word is spoken to his church today where the Scriptures

⁷³ Ibid., 283.

⁷⁴ In 1983, the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the Presbyterian Church in the United States reunited to form the current mainline denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A).

are faithfully preached and attentively read in dependence on the illumination of the Holy Spirit and with readiness to revive their truth and direction.⁷⁵

The confession goes further in describing the relationship between Christianity and other religions, and calls for respect of the others. Even so, it still declares that the church's role is to proclaim the gospel.

The Christian finds parallels between other religions and his own and must approach all religions with openness and respect. Repeatedly God has used the insight of non-Christians to challenge the church to renewal. But the reconciling word of the gospel is God's judgment upon all forms of religion, including the Christian. The gift of God in Christ is for all men. The church, therefore, is commissioned to carry the gospel to all men whatever their religion may be and even when they profess none.⁷⁶

The two most recently written statements adopted by the PC(USA) do not address preaching specifically. Both *The Confession of Belhar* (written in 1986) and *A Brief Statement of Faith* (written in 1983) address specific issues in a time and place. The Belhar confession was written by the Dutch Reformed Church as it struggled with the system of apartheid in South Africa. It is a witness to unity and justice. Because of the specificity of its focus, the confessions say little about proclamation except in its rejection of "forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such ideology in the name of the gospel".⁷⁷ The accompanying letter does state that Scripture is the Word of God and that it stakes its confession upon the authority of Scripture.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Part I: Book of Confessions*, 291.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 305.

A Brief Statement of Faith was also written for a specific purpose. In 1983, the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of American and the Presbyterian Church in the United States were reunited to form the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). As part of the reunion, a new statement of faith was written to articulate the common identity of the two groups. This new confession is in itself proclamation. It does not give instruction like the Scots, Helvetic or Westminster confessions, nor does it address specific social or historical situations like the Barmen declaration, *The Confession of 1967*, and the Belhar confession. Instead, it draws from Scripture to create a new statement of faith that simply proclaims the gospel.⁷⁹

Proclamation, the Sacraments and Worship

The Scots Confession declares that the church is the “true church” when the Word is preached and the sacraments administered. This has been the standard for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in regards to worship. Yet today the sacraments are not administered in every worship service in PC(USA) churches, nor are they always present. Presbyterian churches are given some leeway in how often the sacraments are administered. The Lord’s Supper is not required weekly, but must be administered at least quarterly.⁸⁰ Baptism is celebrated upon request and approval of the session (the congregation’s governing council). Because of this there can be a separation of proclamation from the sacraments, and yet proclamation itself is sacramental for it is also seen as a symbolic act of God’s saving grace.

⁷⁹ See Appendix A for a full copy of the Brief Statement of Faith.

⁸⁰ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Part II the Book of Order*, (USA: The Office of the General Assembly, 2017), 96.

In Christian worship Jesus Christ is truly present and active among us, by the power of the Holy Spirit, through the gifts of Word and Sacrament. Wherever the Scriptures are read and proclaimed and the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are celebrated, the Church bears witness to Jesus Christ, the living Word, and proclaims the mystery of faith. Through these means of grace, God imparts and sustains our faith, orders our common life, and transforms the world. Through these same acts of worship, we share in the life of the Spirit, are united to Jesus Christ, and give glory to God.⁸¹

For the PC(USA), the "Sacraments are the Word of God enacted and sealed in the life of the Church, the body of Christ. They are gracious acts of God, by which Christ Jesus offers his life to us in the power of the Holy Spirit."⁸² In Baptism, people are united with Christ through faith. "Baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God's redeeming grace offered to all people."⁸³ In the Lord's Supper, God's people are in communion with Christ and all who belong to him. "The Lord's Supper enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God's sustaining grace offered to all people. The Lord's Supper is at once God's gift of grace, God's means of grace, and God's call to respond to that grace."⁸⁴

Proclamation of the gospel, Baptism and the Lord's Supper are all means in which Christ's presence is active among us and known to us. These actions are distinct but not separate from one another. In order for the sacraments to be rightly administered, prayers of thanksgiving are offered over the elements. These prayers are proclamation of the saving acts of God. But the prayer does not negate the sacramental aspect of preaching.

⁸¹ Ibid., 76.

⁸² Ibid., 92.

⁸³ Ibid., 93.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 96.

Gerhard Forde comments on this in his book, *The Preached God*, and gives a perspective on preaching as sacramental that reflects beliefs in the Reformed Tradition held by both Lutherans and Presbyterians.

The preaching of the Word, that is, is to do the same thing as the sacraments—to *give* Christ and all his blessings. Indeed, since the Word is Christ, preaching is “pouring Christ into our ears: just as in the sacraments we are baptized into him and he is poured into our mouths. We have tended to overlook or forget the fact that the Christ whose body and blood is really present in the supper is also really present in the speaking of the Word. Preaching is to be understood as a sacramental event.”⁸⁵

While the Presbyterian tradition does not adhere to the concept of transubstantiation, we do believe that Christ is present with us in the sacraments just as he is present in the preaching of the Word. “The sermon is a liturgical event. It is the central act of Protestant worship, closely related to the sacrament. Only a sermon in which each word is fully accounted for is a sacramental act.”⁸⁶ The Word proclaimed is intrinsically linked to the Sacraments. The mere visible reminders in our sanctuaries of the Table and Font are not enough of a link between proclamation and the sacraments. When they are not kept together, “preaching degenerates into mere information; without preaching sacraments degenerate into ‘magic.’”⁸⁷ Perhaps this distancing of preaching from the sacraments has led to a minimized importance of preaching and weakened the congregation’s understanding of the sacraments. Despite our statements that the Word and Sacrament have an integral relationship, we do not regularly preach in sacramental

⁸⁵Gerhard O. Forde, *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament* edited by Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 90-91.

⁸⁶ Barth, *Homiletics*, 119.

⁸⁷ Forde, *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament* 100.

ways that declare God's saving acts of grace. Yet if we view all three as proclamations of God's saving acts, perhaps we can once again find ways to connect them even when only one or two are visibly present.

In the writings of many authors in the Reformed Tradition, proclamation is allowing the Word of God to move again among the people. While a person can read, study and learn from Scripture alone, the act of gathering together in worship to hear the Word proclaimed is essential to the Christian faith. In the Presbyterian Church, proclamation of the Word is required for any worship service. "When that Word is read and proclaimed, Jesus Christ the Living Word is present by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit."⁸⁸ While this proclamation does not have to be in spoken form, it is always to have as its purpose the proclamation of the gospel so that people may hear and respond to the good news.

The Scottish theologian, P.T. Forsyth, also saw the sermon as sacramental, which places the preacher in the midst of the sacramental act.

[The preacher] is a living element in Christ's hands (broken, if need be) for the distribution and increment of grace....[The preacher] is not a mere reporter, not a mere lecturer on sacred thing. He [or she] is not merely illuminative, [the preacher] is augmentative. His [or her] work is not to enlighten simply, but to empower and enhance.⁸⁹

The ability to enlighten, empower and enhance does not come from the person who preaches, but through the Holy Spirit. As Karl Barth states, "where the gospel is preached, God speaks...."⁹⁰ For Thomas Long, "the purpose of preaching is not to

⁸⁸ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, 88.

⁸⁹ P.T. Forsyth, "The One Great Preacher," 412.

⁹⁰ Barth, "Preaching, Revelation, and the Church," 424.

provide a forum for the preacher...but rather to be the occasion for the hearing of a voice beyond the preacher's voice—the very word of the living God.”⁹¹ Preaching does not happen outside of worship. Other forms of communication regarding Scripture and the proclamation can happen elsewhere, but it is in corporate worship that proclamation as preaching of the Word occurs, and the congregation is empowered to respond. The congregation plays a role in the incarnate nature of the Word by hearing it proclaimed, and then by carrying that spoken Word into the world.

Because the word of God is what a preacher wrestles with in the pulpit, and because it is a living word, every sermon is God's creation as well as the creation of the preacher and the congregation. All three participate in the making of it, with the preacher as their designated voice.⁹²

The congregation participates in the proclamation of the gospel through hearing to discern Jesus Christ, to accept the grace that he offers and to respond to his call.

Preaching is the Proclamation of the Gospel

Regardless of the times or the style, the role of preaching is always proclamation of the gospel—the good news of God's redemptive acts in the world. When we speak of preaching as proclamation of the gospel, we are stating that preaching is the Word of God spoken and heard once again. “Preaching brings the Scriptures forward as a living voice in the congregation. Biblical texts have a future as well as a past, and preaching seeks to fulfill that future by continuing the conversation of the text in the present.”⁹³ There is a difference between preaching the gospel and preaching about the gospel, and this difference goes deeper than semantics. Preaching about the gospel can put the exegetical

⁹¹ Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 25.

⁹² Barbara Brown Taylor, “Preaching”, 48.

⁹³ Jacobsen, *Homiletical Theology: Preaching as Doing Theology*, 130.

work in the forefront. The purpose of such sermons can be to educate in historical-critical theory about Scripture. The purpose can be to explain psychological or social concerns, or it can be a history lecture looking at other sources to provide veracity to the passage. All of the exegetical work that is done is important to proclamation, but the “hows” of sermon preparation should never replace the “why” of preaching.

In preaching, we put together Christian understandings with images of lived experience. In doing so, preaching demonstrates that our Christian convictions are true to life. Preaching does not trade in formal proofs or argued syllogisms. If, in sermons, we turn to rational proofs, we will elevate reason to a position of ultimacy instead of faith-consciousness.⁹⁴

Why do we preach? In Matthew’s Gospel, the proclamation of the Resurrection is followed by the command to tell. “Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has risen from the dead’” (Matthew 28:7a). The women were sent to tell what they had heard and seen. The disciples are then called to be witnesses to the gospel. They proclaim what they saw, heard and experienced. They do not engage in scientific debates about the probability of resurrection. They do not deconstruct the syntax and grammar of the words to decipher the variety of meanings behind the words. They go and they tell. Centuries removed, the preacher’s role is still to go and tell. “The preacher is a prophet who bears witness to what he or she has heard in his or her priestly role.”⁹⁵

Even though preaching is based on the written word found in Scripture, is it not about something that just happened in the past.

The deed of proclamation in the living present is the deed of the living God! It is what God has in mind for us. The mighty acts of God are not over, not relegated to the past or to some philosophy or theology of

⁹⁴ Buttrick, “Designing Moves,” 342.

⁹⁵ Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit*, 53-54.

history. The proclamation itself is the mighty act of God in the living present. Everything God has done in Jesus Christ has been poured into this moment. The incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God in Jesus is the authorization for the proclamation of the will of God in the living present. The preacher needs the “nerve”—the Spirit—to act on that.⁹⁶

The struggle is to let that proclamation be heard through the sermon, to answer the question of why the story is told instead of focusing on ways to make it historically or empirically accurate. The proclamation of the resurrection is not found in scientific proof of resurrections in the natural world, but in the way behind the act—the incredible act of God’s saving grace that reaches beyond the bounds of death itself.

Summary

Proclamation is more than a descriptive word for preaching. It is found at the very heart of our faith both in the PC(USA) and in the universal church. Proclamation begins at the very beginning, “Then God spoke....” (Genesis 1:ff) In Revelation, we are told that the angels, the multitudes, indeed “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea” (Rev. 5:13a) proclaim the good news. In the confessional statements of the PC(USA), there is also an emphasis on proclamation. From its origins in Scotland, the Presbyterian tradition has stated that the church should focus on the “true preaching of the Word of God.”⁹⁷ Proclamation of the gospel is necessary in order for the church to be faithful to its call, and it is a responsibility that falls primarily on those who are called to preach.

⁹⁶ Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation*, 30.

⁹⁷ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Part 1: Book of Confessions*, 19.

CHAPTER FOUR

A THEOLOGY OF PREACHING AS PROCLAMATION

Introduction

Why do we preach? The answer to this question varies. We preach to teach people about faith, or to develop discipleship. We preach prophetic words of social justice that include calls to action. We preach to comfort the grief-stricken in times of tragedy. We preach to inspire hope. We preach to tell a story and give a moral lesson. We preach for a variety of reasons, but at its very core, we preach because we are called to proclaim the good news of God's saving acts. We are *evangelion*-bearers of the gospel. We are heralds of God's promises that are still being played out in the world. We are preachers of the Word; the Word found in Scripture, found in Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit's work among us.

The Sovereignty of God

In preaching, the focus is on the Word of God because God's Word is the first and the final word. God alone is sovereign over all creation, and it is through God's word that this sovereignty is revealed. God spoke the world into being. God did not craft the cosmos from wood, brick or clay, for none of those materials existed in the beginning. God did not scan an image and send it to a 3-D printer. God created through words. God spoke, "Let there be..." and through the words worlds were shaped and formed. God spoke all creatures into being. Even though humanity was shaped from the clay, God

spoke the image into being first. “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...’ (Genesis 1:26).

Made in the image of God, humanity was unique among God’s creations, but this uniqueness does not make us humans equal to God. As God developed a relationship with us, we became recipients of God’s words, but we do not change God’s Word to fit our wishes and desires. We are able to create through words images and ideas, thoughts and stories, but we are not co-authors in the act of creation with God. We were granted the title of steward so that we may join in God’s creative song, harmonizing in different ways. However, it is always God’s melody, because all of creation, including time and space is God’s song, God’s word.

God chose to create through words and this creation included the development of covenants with us. God spoke the promise to Abraham, first commanding him to go and Abraham trusted that word. God promised Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. This promise was never found in a written contract, witnessed and notarized by others. It was a spoken promise, but in making it God chose to enter into a new relationship with Abraham’s family.

God chose to respond to the cries of the enslaved Israelites in Egypt and called Moses to speak God’s plan to liberate the people. “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Go to Pharaoh, and say to him, “Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews...”’ (Exodus 9:1). God provided for the people during their exodus, giving them not only food and water, but a word—the Law—to once again create anew, shaping them into a new community. God parted the waters of the Jordan just as God parted the waters of the sea, so the people could conclude their journey into the land that God has promised them.

When the people clamored for a king to rule them, God heard their cries and called Samuel to anoint a dynasty. During the struggles of being a nation, the rise and fall of kings, and threats from outside forces, God continued to be present with the people in the words of the prophets. God's word was sent to chasten the wicked and to comfort the afflicted and oppressed. God chose to continually call people to proclaim God's Word in the world. The words of the prophets were not their own. The words they proclaimed were God ("Thus says the Lord") as they played the role of herald, calling people to listen and hear again the promises of the One who held sway over other princes, principalities and gods.

The words of the prophets went unheeded. In a strange twist to redeem us once and for all, God chose to come and not just dwell among us, but to become one of us. God's Word became flesh in Jesus Christ. God chose to enter the world not with a thunderous bang, but in the whimper and wails of a newborn. God's Word was present among us in a new way, physically present in the person of Jesus who spoke as "one having authority" (Mark 1:22), healing and casting out demons with words—to show that nothing was more powerful than God. God chose in Jesus to go to the cross, to die for us, and then God defeated death in the resurrection, breaking down the last barrier between God and us.

The whole story of Scripture is the story of God speaking and acting in the world, and God still moves among us in the Spirit that was sent to shape a new community of faith. This community would "turn the world upside down" as it followed where God called them to go and proclaimed the good news of God's saving and sovereign acts.

Preaching should always proclaim the truth that God is sovereign. God alone is the judge of our conscience, our heart, our mind and our soul. So we as preachers must take care that our preaching does not supplant God and place us in the role of the one who is in charge. In prophetic preaching we may feel called to take a stand against certain actions. And it is true; God does call us to proclaim the news that is good news to the oppressed and bad news to the oppressor. But in doing so, we as preachers do not declare who has received God's grace and who has not. The word we proclaim does have the ability to cut to the heart, just as Peter's words did when he proclaimed the gospel on Pentecost. It was the Word of God that acted and had an effect then, and God's Word can still do the same today.

Because God is sovereign over all, nothing is outside of God's realm.

...the Word of God must remain sovereign and free and thus be able to take its own course. When we are ready to serve the Word of God in this way, with this evaluation of ourselves, the Word of God will be proclaimed, for God will speak [God's] own Word in the congregation.⁹⁸

So proclamation can address social issues. Care should be taken that in doing so the Word is not diminished or relegated to a footnote in the sermon. In proclaiming God's saving acts, there is room for the naming of sin and human brokenness. For how can we receive God's forgiveness, if we never hear the call to confess? How can we repent and turn in our thinking and actions if we do not experience that slaying of the spirit that happens when sin is named? Proclaiming the gospel is not about making every sermon lightness and fluff. Nor is it the promise of prosperity that leaves us without hope. At times proclaiming God's actions and words should reduce us to tears for proclamation can reveal the ways in which we have broken the heart of the One who so loves us. At

⁹⁸ Barth, *Homiletics*, 80.

these times we cry out, “What should we do?” (Acts 2:37), and look again to the sovereign God for mercy and grace.

Jesus Is the Incarnate Word

As John proclaimed, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and have seen his glory” (John 1:1, 14a). Jesus is the Word of God incarnate. This unique status reveals that Jesus was not merely a prophet, teacher or healer. He was the very Word of God—the voice of God—in a tangible, physical form that all could see and hear. When Jesus speaks it is the Word of God that is speaking. “This view of preaching is incarnational: as the Word came in the flesh, so the Word comes in the form of human speech.”⁹⁹ Jesus does not begin his proclamations with “Thus says the Lord”, because he is not speaking on behalf of God, he is speaking as God. When Jesus says, “You have heard it said, but I say...” the people are hearing the true and one Word of God.

When Jesus heals, feeds, challenges and questions, it is the Word of God at work. The Word of God breaks into the world through Christ, and it is the Word that so threatens the words others use to try to shape the world to their own agendas. So the Word was a threat to those who believed they were in control, and they tried to silence that Word on the cross. When Christ cries out, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34), it is the Word of God calling out not only as plea but also as a promise. And this promise is kept when the Word springs to life again in the resurrection and causes the disciples’ hearts to burn on the road to Emmaus.

⁹⁹ Craddock, *As One without Authority*, 46.

In proclaiming the good news found in the birth, death and resurrection of Christ, we speak forth the Word of God again. We speak the words of forgiveness, grace and new life. Our words are the proclamation of the good news of the kingdom of God that is revealed in the person of Christ. Our sermons should focus on that proclamation and not be limited to attempts to make Christ “personable.” Indeed, how much more personable could he be? In the Incarnation, the Word becomes flesh. This means Jesus ate, drank, slept, cried, laughed and experienced every aspect of humanity. We do not need to make Jesus more human. Sermons that focus on Jesus’ teachings as philosophical thoughts or moral lessons weaken the moments for proclamation.

Christ cannot merely be talked about, he must finally be done to us. Christ has been explained to us endlessly, dressed and redressed in everybody’s clothes, painted in everybody’s color and likeness, fashioned and refashioned into everybody’s hero. The explanations never seem to stick. If he is to be our Lord and Christ he must finally be proclaimed as so as to do us in and make us new.¹⁰⁰

We do not preach about the resurrection, we preach the resurrection. We do not preach about forgiveness of sins, we preach forgiveness. We do not preach about Christ, we preach Christ. As Karl Barth wrote, “Beware of the tendency to preach about Christianity, and try to preach Christ.”¹⁰¹

The Word in the Spirit

We hear the Word proclaimed over and over again in the book of Acts by many of the followers of the risen and ascended Jesus Christ. These proclamations are not idle chatter as the disciples reminisce about their lives with Jesus, nor are they a rehashing of the latest news to come out of Jerusalem. The apostles do not begin preaching until after

¹⁰⁰ Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation*, 105.

¹⁰¹ Barth, “Preaching, Revelation, and the Church,” 19.

they have received the Spirit. It is the Spirit who inspires their words. It is the Spirit that opens the ears and the hearts of those who are listening to them. The Word that is God is spoken anew again and people respond to it. Their response is not based on Peter or Paul's skills as dynamic speakers, but because the words they spoke proclaimed a radical new reality. They proclaimed a new way for people to enter into conversation and relationship with God.

Christ promised that God would send an advocate, the Spirit, to walk with, to walk alongside the apostles, and this same Spirit walks with us today. Those of us who are called to proclaim the gospel are not just disciples. We are apostles called and sent to proclaim news that is actually new in the world. The Word we proclaim is not a dead word. It is not a word that can be relegated to one place and one time. Instead of separating the Word from the world by making designations between "church words" and "rest of the world words", we as preachers should listen again to Scripture and to what words the Spirit will lead us to use in order to once again reveal the good news of grace and salvation.

The Christian practice of preaching is not a homelitic theory, practical technique, or form of religious communication; rather, it is the gift of the Spirit to a reconciled and redeemed humanity, a conversation initiated by God in which the church is addressed by the Father through the Son. This Word is the risen Christ, who summons the church to follow him in bearing witness to creation's true end of praising and knowing the Triune God.¹⁰²

We must be careful not to say, "I preach as the Spirit leads me," without any exegetical work or reflection. As preachers we ought to create a holy space where we can sit with the text and listen to it, dwell with it and converse with it in prayer and critical

¹⁰² Pasquarello III, *Christian Preaching*, 31.

thought. In that way our eyes can be opened so we may proclaim the words once again.

“...God (through the Holy Spirit) is present and working at each moment of sermon preparation, in the embodiment of the sermon, and in the continuing effects of the sermon in the congregation.”¹⁰³

Scripture as the Reliable Witness for Proclamation

The gospel—the good news of the living God—is proclaimed in both the Old and New Testaments. All of scripture points to the one definitive act of God in Jesus Christ. Through the words of the prophets we hear the promise of the One who is to come. The acts of God recorded in the Torah and Hebrew texts reveal the salvific nature of God that culminates in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. Likewise, the gospels (including Acts) and epistles point back to the Word of God as experienced in Jesus, the Word-made-flesh.

Scripture is the reliable witness for proclamation because it is the revelation of God’s Word as it was spoken and acted in the world. Scripture’s authenticity is not found in proven, empirical facts. Scripture’s truth is found in how it points to the revelation of God’s Word. It is in preaching and hearing that Scripture reveals that God is still at work in the world among us. Scripture is not merely one book among many for us to look to for examples, stories and pithy quotes. To treat it as such is to make it a dead word. Many attempts that have been made to make Scripture “relevant” have actually made it irrelevant. Removing such words as Redeemer from our common lexicon and replacing them with more readily understandable words does not make the redemption proclaimed through the whole scope of the Bible more real. Instead it weakens the power of

¹⁰³ Jacobsen, *Homiletical Theology*, 133.

proclamation. In Scripture we find the vocabulary of faith for proclamation. By using this language we help others experience a God who is still very much alive, active and relevant.

The modern church has been willing to use everyone's language but its own. In conservative churches, gospel speech is traded for dogmatic assertion and moralism, for self-help psychologies and narcotic mantras. In more liberal speech, talk tiptoes around the outrage of Christian discourse and ends up as an innocuous, though urbane, affirmation of the ruling order. Unable to preach Christ and him crucified, we preach humanity and it improved.¹⁰⁴

Historical accuracy, scientific proofs, and attempts to make Scripture relevant do not necessarily weaken the truths proclaimed in Scripture. While it may seem implausible for the sun to stand still, or for a person to live three days inside a fish, these details are not the truth of the story. Instead they point to the truth. It is about the sovereignty of God who could stop the earth's rotation if God so chose. It is about the grace of God that forgives those deemed the most wicked of people and the most stubborn of prophets. Indeed, the truth of the resurrection is not found in physical evidence, but in its proclamation of God's enduring love. In allowing Scripture to speak its truths through preaching we are participating in its proclamation, and further spread the gospel to those who are hungry for it.

Proclamation is preaching that is always anchored in the biblical texts. "This transition from text to sermon is a transition from Scripture to the spoken word. Thus the task prescribed here consists in making what is written into spoken word or, as we can now also say, in letting the text become God's word again."¹⁰⁵ Adding a snippet of a Scripture passage here and there, does not make a sermon proclamation. In fact, sermon

¹⁰⁴ William H. Willimon, "Baptismal Speech", 457.

¹⁰⁵ Gerhard Ebeling, "Word of God and Hermeneutics", 210.

series that are based on other sources—popular trends, movie franchises, and so on—can deepen the separation between the divine and the so-called real world. Such series can have minimal exegetical and theological reflection and this can lead us to a lazy theology of preaching that focuses more on what the people in the pews (the consumer) want to hear rather than proclaiming the gospel.

This is not to say we should not look outside of Scripture for illustrations. If we believe in the sovereignty of God then nothing is outside of God's realm. But we should look at these other sources through Scripture-tinged glasses. We look to the biblical text first because it is the unique witness of God's acts throughout the human story that reveals how God still acts in the world. "When the gospel is preached, God speaks: there is no question of the preacher revealing anything or of a revelation being conveyed through him.... Revelation is a closed system in which God is the subject, the object, and the middle term."¹⁰⁶

Justification by Grace

As previously asked, how can we human beings receive forgiveness if we do not hear a call to confess? Likewise, how would we know that we have been justified by grace, forgiven of our sins, and redeemed by Christ if it is not proclaimed? The good news that we receive is that we are loved, forgiven and saved. This is the proclamation we make when we preach the gospel, and it is that revelation of grace that sets us all free. Proclamation is the method God chose to use to extend the gift of grace to the world. Just as God proclaimed the world into being, so God redeems it in the proclamation to the shepherds, in an empty tomb, and through the Spirit. The disciples begin to proclaim this

¹⁰⁶ Barth, "Preaching, Revelation, and the Church," 424.

good news after receiving the Spirit on Pentecost. Peter's proclamation that day causes the conversion of thousands. Paul's proclamation of grace is the grace he received after his encounters around Damascus. The apostles extended the gift of grace to those they meet through proclamation. It is through proclamation of grace that we come to believe and receive it. "The task of the preacher can therefore be summed up thus: to reproduce in thought that one unique event, the gift of God's grace."¹⁰⁷

Is grace something we feel rather than something we hear? How would we know what we are experiencing without the words of proclamation? The language of proclamation—the words of good news—gives shape and expression to the experience of grace. It is one thing to explain the benefits of forgiveness, it is another thing entirely to hear the words, "you are forgiven." It is one thing to educate people on the importance of community, and another to welcome them with the proclamation, "you are a child of God." Our preaching should strive to lead to an encounter with the grace-filled Spirit, which in turn enables us to the live lives of faith. This same grace-filled Spirit enables us to proclaim the gospel. Proclamation is more than saying words, it is speaking out loud what we ourselves believe and experience through the gospel.

Priesthood of All Believers

Not all who serve God are called to preach from the pulpit, but proclamation is not just reserved for those who do preach. Proclamation of the good news can and should be done in all areas of ministry because proclamation feeds all who love and serve the Lord. In saying, "I am the bread of heaven," Christ proclaimed he was the Word that fed people's hearts and souls, just as he feed them by breaking bread on the hillside. People

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 428.

are hungry for the word that sustains life. In proclamation, we are feeding people this bread once again so they may fully live. While pithy meditations on the trend of the day, and humorous stories may energize people, they are the preaching equivalent of a high-energy drink. The burst is short-lived and can lead to the assumption that the gospel just doesn't cut it in our world. Authentic proclamation of the gospel provides a substantial meal that nourishes for longer, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, may sustain people for longer than we and others could imagine.

Proclamation can happen in the hospital room, the campsite, or in the classroom as well as the pulpit. It can happen anywhere that the good news is shared. To relegate it solely to the pulpit is to limit the world of the Spirit and weaken proclamation. Christ did not just proclaim the kingdom of God in the synagogue. He proclaimed in on hillside and on roads. He proclaimed it in boats, on lakeshores, and at dinner tables. He proclaimed it in the Temple, in the courtyards of Pilate, on the cross, in a garden, and in a locked room. The apostles likewise proclaimed the gospel everywhere, including in places of worship. To be a minister of the Word is not just about preaching on Sunday mornings, it is about proclaiming the Word in every corner of life so that all may be fed. "Proclamation extends beyond the pulpit and the clerical office, and beyond the event of the Sunday sermon to include any speaking and hearing of the Word of God in the life of the Christian community."¹⁰⁸

Proclamation and the Sacraments

The Sacraments are visible signs of God's grace, but the tangible mediums of water, bread and wine cannot be separated from proclamation. The words that are uttered

¹⁰⁸ Currie, *The Only Sacrament Left to Us*, 12.

over Table and Font are key components of the sacraments. That is not to say that these words are magical incantations that transform the elements. The words are proclamation, for they recount the acts of God and witness to the Word in Jesus Christ.

The prayers of thanksgiving spoken over the water at baptism recount the saving acts of God by sharing the stories of when God used the water.

The minister may give thanks over the water in his or her own words:
 a. praising God for God's faithfulness in the covenant; b. thankfully remembering God's reconciling acts such as: the cleansing and rebirth in the flood in the time of Noah; the exodus through the waters of the sea; Jesus' baptism in the Jordan; the baptism of Jesus' death and his resurrection; c. invoking the Holy Spirit to attend and empower the baptism; to make the water a water of redemption and rebirth; to equip the church for faithfulness. The prayer concludes with an ascription of praise to the triune God.¹⁰⁹

The prayers over the bread and cup also proclaim the gospel as do the words of institution that conclude with proclamation, "Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the saving death of our risen Lord, until he comes".¹¹⁰

In the real actions at the Table and Font, and in the words spoken we proclaim what God has done. The words alone are not enough to make the elements sacramental. The words are in partnership with the elements and the actions that take place during the sacraments. We hear the words, "This is the feast of God for the children of God", and we physically gather together to touch, to taste, to see and to hear the proclamation. We wholly participate in God's saving acts through Jesus Christ. The feel of another person's head or hand; the texture and flavor of bread and wine; the sensation of water trickling through fingers and on a forehead, all serve to bring the words that are proclaimed to life

¹⁰⁹ *Book of Common Worship*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 412.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

through the Spirit. The words call forth to memory what God is in Jesus Christ, and it is through our participation in the sacraments that we proclaim the good news.

But what about the days when the sacraments are not celebrated? We do not baptize every Sunday, and many Presbyterian churches do not celebrate the Lord's Supper weekly. Does that mean proclamation does not happen every time we preach? Preaching itself is not a sacrament. A sermon that focuses on things other than God's saving acts is not proclamation. And simply placing the Table and Font in full view will not make our preaching proclamation or sacramental.

Any reference to sacrament does not begin with the Lord's Supper or baptism, Barth maintains, but begins with Jesus Christ and his ongoing presence in the life of the Christian community through the work of the Spirit. This broader view of sacramental presence, not only includes Scripture and preaching, but renders baptism and the Lord's Supper dependent on the gospel, on the proclaimed and heard Word of God. This sacramental understanding of Scripture and preaching in the church's life is why Barth maintains that preaching grounded on the witness of Scripture, "is the only sacrament left to us."¹¹¹

When our preaching focuses on and recounts God's acts of grace then it is proclamation and that in its self is sacramental.

Power and Proclamation

Proclamation of the Word carries a certain amount of power that is unique to it. This is because the good news is still radical in the world and it always compels a response. When the Word of God is proclaimed, people do not just hear it, they respond to it. Biblical preaching will always lead to some action or reaction. Where we must tread carefully in our attempts to create or manipulate the response. We may think our well-crafted words will lead to a certain action only to have people respond in a different way.

¹¹¹ Currie, *The Only Sacrament Left to Us*, 20.

This does not mean we have failed in our task as preachers. The Spirit is beyond our control, and people will experience it as it leads them. Our words can have unintended consequences, which is why we should be careful about our motivation to compel a certain response or evoke a certain emotion. As Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

It is a delicate job for the one in the pulpit, a balancing act between the text, the congregation, and the self. If the preacher leans too far one way, he will slide with text against the congregation and deliver a finger-pointing sermon from on high. If the preacher leans too far the other way, she will side with the congregation against the text and deliver a sermon that stops short of encountering God.

What is called for, instead, is a sermon that honors all of its participants, in which preachers speak in their own voices out of their own experience, addressing God on the congregation's behalf and – with great care and humility—the congregation on God's behalf.¹¹²

The question before us is, does the action we want people to take reflect the gospel as it's proclaimed? Will this exhortation of Scripture feed and lead them further in their lives as people of God?

The abuse and misuse of power in the pulpit, the mistrust of institutional authority, and the outright denial (in our culture) of any power have weakened proclamation both in and outside of the pulpit.

We have so thoroughly confused authority with an authoritarianism based on personal charisma, organizational genius, and persuasive public speaking, that responsible Christians hesitate to exercise the authority vested in preaching. The authority of Jesus is a theme that has been usurped by fundamentalist preachers and adopted as their ideology for their empire-building. We think that if we approach preaching in a spirit of dialogue, disclaiming the obligation to move anyone toward anything, the need for authority will vanish. But the importance of authority cuts across all forms and styles of discourse, because true authority comes from the word of the gospel as mediated by the church. Jesus' authority as God's servant was such that he cast out demons, raised the dead, forgave sins, and commissioned a witnessing church. Who he was and what he did were incorporated into the church's understanding of him and of its life and mission. This corporate understanding has, as a whole and in its constituent elements,

¹¹² Taylor, "Preaching," 48.

become authoritative for proclamation, not in the restrictive sense of dogmatic prohibitions, but in the normative and life-giving power of its original intent.¹¹³

We cannot deny the power of the gospel if we are to proclaim it. In Mark's opening chapter, the people were amazed to hear Jesus speak with authority unlike the scribes. In our careful attempts not to offend people (lest they leave the church), do we speak without authority because we will make no declaratory statement? In our attempts to make sure all feel comfortable, have we so convoluted the words that no one is able to distinguish the Word?

Before Jesus ascended, he passed authority and power on to the apostles. "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and earth have been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you'" (Matthew 28:19-20). The apostles took this to heart and were able to proclaim the good news with authority, but they also knew this authority was not of their own making. Neither was it granted to them by some other power in the world, but was given to them by Jesus Christ. The power with which they spoke was Christ's power. They could not and did not claim it for themselves but spoke always as Christ's witnesses, "And you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you" (Acts 1:8). The apostles always recognized that their ability to speak boldly came to them through the authority of Christ. "In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to boast of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished

¹¹³ Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 3.

through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God..." (Romans 15:18-19).

Like Paul, we can boldly proclaim the gospel because in doing so we are not claiming our own authority or boasting of our own power. Rather we proclaim the authority and power of God through Jesus Christ, testifying to what he has done and will continue to do. To negate this power, to hide it under a basket, is to relegate preaching to another form of public speaking. We are called to preach boldly, proclaiming the good news to the ends of the earth.

CHAPTER FIVE

COMPARISON OF TWO SERMONS

Both sermons were preached on Matthew 17:1-9, which is Matthew's account of the Transfiguration. I chose this text for two reasons. I wanted to write a sermon that would actually be preached in a worship service. Since I serve in a middle-government position, I do not preach every Sunday. I was scheduled to fill the pulpit for Transfiguration Sunday so I chose to use that sermon. I chose the Matthew text because I had preached the first sermon on it ten years ago. At the time I was exceptionally proud of the sermon and had received positive feedback on it. I chose to use a sermon I had believed was strong because I felt there would be more of a challenge to comparing it to the theology of preaching I developed in chapter five. I was also interested to see what, if any, of that theology was already present in a sermon qualified by the hearers as "good."

The Context for Sermon One

The first sermon was preached while I was serving as an interim pastor in Massachusetts. The church was a small congregation that averaged about sixty people in worship. The congregation was diverse with long-time residents and immigrants from Cameroon and Lebanon. The education level of the congregation ranged from blue-collar workers to college professors. Religion was viewed differently than I was used to when serving congregations in the Bible Belt. In this northeast region of our country, religion was a private affair and the culture was highly secular. It was not surprising to have civic

events such as parades scheduled on Sunday mornings. The congregation had felt a deep need for spirituality but they were also very independent and did not place much importance on worshipping together as a community.

Sermon One

Some of you may have noticed that I have quite a few toys in my office. Most of them are just for fun, but I do have a few toys that have some meaning attached to them. One such toy is a small dinosaur, properly a plesiosaur that was given to me to represent Nessie. I am a firm believer in the Loch Ness monster. Scoff at it if you will, but no one has proved that she does not exist. I like a world with a loch monster in it. I like a world where there are unexplainable events, mystery in other words. I like a world where there is more in heaven and on earth than are dreamt of in my philosophy.

I like mystery in my faith too. In fact, ours is a faith that is built on mystery – the incarnation, the resurrection are mysteries.¹¹⁴ And perhaps no story points us to the mystery of our faith more than the transfiguration. It's a story that is beyond historical reconstruction or scientific verification. And personally I like it that way. It allows for more mystery.

Since the story cannot be really explained, I'm not going to try. It would be like trying to describe a dream—it loses something in the translation. It is also a story we cannot fully understand without some divine help. The only way we could understand it would be to have experienced it ourselves. We have our mountaintop moments, but they

¹¹⁴ In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), communion liturgies often contain the statement, "Great is the mystery of faith" to which the congregation responds, "Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again." This was a common liturgy used with this particular congregation while I was serving there.

do not compare to moments such as this moment on a mountain in Israel, when the veil between the physical and spiritual worlds are removed.

This type of moment doesn't happen very often. In fact, the Bible only has few moments where it does happen, and each time is unique unto itself. For Jacob it was a dream—Jacob's ladder. It happened for Moses on the mountaintop, but there were not witnesses. The only way the Israelites knew something had happened was the fact that Moses' face shone from then on. Moses appears kind of like Richard Dreyfuss' character in "Close Encounters of the Third Kind": half his face burned from the bright lights, a wild glassy look in his eyes, making shapes in mashed potatoes and fanatically whispering, "This means something." And just like Dreyfuss' character freaked out his family, so Moses scared the Israelites to the point where they asked him to wear a veil because they couldn't handle seeing that glory.

With Jesus, however, we have witnesses and they do not seem to leave the mountain with any physical signs that something happened. We could speculate on why Jesus only took three of the disciples with him, and why those three, but where's the fun in that. For me, it's fun to speculate on what happened to Jesus. The Greek word for transfigure means "metamorphose." In my mind, I immediately start thinking about things like the movie, "The Fly." Or if you prefer something a little more high-brow, it also conjured images of Kafka. But that is not what happens to Jesus. He does not turn into some other creature, or mutate so be part-human, part something else. Jesus is not a Mighty Morphin Power Ranger.

Perhaps Jesus is more like a superhero, Superman for example. He doesn't change shape or form, instead he reveals his true identity. Before his most trusted disciples the

human appearance of Jesus is cast aside and his genuine self is revealed. And when it happens, the disciples experience more than surprise or shock. They experience a moment of awe, a moment of wonder, a moment of mystery.

In this way, it is similar to the crowning of Aragorn in *Return of the King*. The regal celebration begins only after the people have witnessed an epiphany, a revelation of their king as more than an earthly ruler.

When Aragorn arose all that beheld him gazed in silence, for it seems to that he was revealed to them now for the first-time. Tall as the sea-kings of old, he stood above all that were near; ancient of days he seemed and yet in the flower of manhood and wisdom sat upon his brow, and strength and healing were in his hands, and a light was about him.

And then Faramir cried: "Behold the King!"¹¹⁵

In that moment, the people saw Aragorn was not just another earthly king, but the fulfillment of all that had been promised. It does sound familiar, doesn't it? In the same way, what happened to the people of Gondor was what happened to the disciples. Now they saw not just an earthly leader, not just a teacher, preacher or healer, they saw the Son of God—they saw God. And in that moment, they were touched by the divine and not only saw him, they also saw what they were to become.

They were changed men. They could not share their experience with others (although someone obviously tried), but it would stay with them forever. I imagine they would sit there at times with wild, glassy expressions, making shapes in their food, and mutter, "This means something". In that moment, they too were morphed into their real identities, and that memory would give them the strength to become what they were meant to be.

¹¹⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (USA: Houghton Mifflin, Inc., 1955), 246.

In a commentary on this passage, the writer concludes with the phrase, “Become what you are”.¹¹⁶ This is what happened to Jesus on the mountain. He did not change, he became what he was. It is also what started to happen for the disciples—they still had a way to go before they would become what they were—but it had started. Because what you are is not the same as the phrase “be all that you can be” or “be what you want to be.” I find it more reassuring to be honest. It’s saying that a bit of the divine is present in us. All we need to do is throw off our disguises.

We spend a lot more time and effort on creating our alter egos than we do on becoming who we are intended to be (by our creator). You know what those alter egos are—the images we try to morph into that fit society’s norms. Think about it for a moment. When asked to describe yourself, what do you say? How do you define yourself? By your work, area of study, family relations, likes and dislikes, even physical appearance? That’s how many of us describe ourselves.

But how often do we define ourselves by our faith? How often do we reveal ourselves to be spiritual followers of Christ? Many try to avoid that for the most part, and it’s because we don’t want to be seen as foolish—as believers in something that cannot be proven. We stay inside our alter egos and then wonder why there’s something missing. Something doesn’t feel quite right. Even when we are at our most relaxed and content, there’s a part that isn’t right and that’s because we have not become what we are.

We can’t just leave the mystery on the mountaintop. It’s a funny thing that we do that because we spend time trying to recapture it. There’s a great longing in our world for more spiritual things and many try all kinds of ways to recapture mystery. I have a lot of

¹¹⁶ This sermon was written over ten years ago, and there are no reference notes to indicate in which commentary the phrase is found.

those items myself—from books, to mandalas, to a labyrinth and even a rosary. But I’ve discovered that the reason they have not worked is because I have tried to create the mystery under my own rules, in my own space and time. We cannot create the mystery. We cannot capture it anymore than we can explain it.

The only way we can experience the mystery again and again is to embrace it. We need to open ourselves to the possibilities of mystery in the physical as well as the spiritual world. Something can happen at this table. We all know the bread does not morph into the body of Christ, and the juice does not turn into blood. But something can happen here, if we open ourselves to it. When we can embrace the mystery of our faith, the mystery will embrace us. That’s the only way I can explain it. It can happen during the sacraments, it can happen while you are at prayer, it can happen while you are hiking up a mountain. When you open yourself up to the possibility of the mystery, the veil can become thin and we can catch a glimpse of that glory. And that is what gives us the strength to continue on in this work of becoming what we are—children of the living God, made flesh in Christ, transfigured so we may all know who he is and who we are. Great is the mystery of our faith.

Analysis of Sermon One

What is the focus of the sermon?

The focus of the sermon was the mystery of the Transfiguration.

What was the sermon’s function?

At first glance it appeared that the function of the sermon was to explain the Transfiguration without explaining it. The intent was to talk about what happened to

Jesus during the Transfiguration. However, about half-way through the sermon, its function shifted to encouraging people to embrace the mystery of faith.

What theological themes appear in this sermon?

Theologically speaking this sermon was all over the place and therefore no strong theological themes are present. It touches briefly on the divinity of Christ and then moves away to focus on the disciples and the congregation. It concludes with a statement on the Incarnate Word. There is nothing in this sermon on the other themes in the theology of preaching. The sermon skates very close to the idea of transformation of individuals, which is not part of the Reformed tradition, particularly where it spends time reflecting on how we too can become something more with an element of the divine.

The focus on the mystery of faith discusses what we can do with the mystery, not on what the mystery points us to. It focuses more on how we can open ourselves to experiencing the mystery and thereby “catch a glimpse of the glory” of the divine. It does not proclaim this as the work of God or the Spirit.

How is this sermon proclamation?

I would say that this sermon is not proclamation as defined in the theology of preaching in chapter four. The sermon does not rely on the Scripture passage from Matthew for its focus. Neither does it take seriously the truth of the story and set out to proclaim it. It begs the question of what was the gospel in this sermon? The sermon ended up being a lecture on the fact that there are things in our faith we cannot understand, we can only experience them. And yet, is that really what this text is about?

The sermon tries to accomplish what I said I was not going to do: explain the Transfiguration. This so-called explanation is not proclamation, nor does it focus on the

Scripture passage. Instead I used six different popular culture references that did not explain the Transfiguration at all. They detracted from the gospel message rather than strengthening it. The lack of focus on the text and the addition of extra biblical stories also contributed to the over all disjointedness of the sermon.

The gospel is found in one tiny snippet in the middle of the sermon. In that section, I wrote, “Now they saw not just an earthly leader, not just a teacher, preacher or healer, they saw the Son of God—they saw God.” But then the sermon quickly jumps to the disciples instead of staying with that moment of proclamation. The conclusion comes close with the statement that we are “children of the living God, made flesh in Christ, transfigured so we all may know who he is and who we are.” But is this concluding statement proclamation of the gospel, or is it simply a defining statement about us?

Because I do not define this sermon as proclamation, I would also say it is not sacramental. In the conclusion, it does refer to the Table, but there is no mention of God’s saving acts tied to it. The focus there is also on the sacrament being a mystery that is somehow dependent on our actions—opening ourselves to the mystery—instead of the truth of God’s action through Christ and what the Supper represents.

The Context for Sermon Two

The second sermon was preached for a small congregation in southwest Texas within thirty miles of the Texas/Mexico border. The congregation averages about six people in worship on any given Sunday. Its membership consists of mostly retired people with a few members who work in the city government. They have been without pastoral leadership for two years and are concerned about their future. They also are divided between whether to remain a part of the PC(USA) or to move to another denomination.

The Sunday I preached, I was also meeting with the leadership to discuss options for their future, so I knew their anxiety would be high.

Sermon Two

Have you ever been haunted by a dream? I mean the kind of dream that stays with you throughout the day where you can remember snippets, but that is all. It's the kind of dream that when you try to describe it to someone else they just look at you blankly or say, "oh I had a dream like that once," but you know that what they experienced isn't the same thing. Our dreams are unique experiences for each of us.

I often think Peter, James and John felt that way about the Transfiguration. They witnessed something that was so unique and rare that the related accounts lose something in translation. We can hear the story. We can try to imagine what it must have been like. We can even try to figure out what it all means and what it means for us.

But this is a story uniquely about Jesus, which is not to say it has no relevance for you and me, but we must tread carefully because trying to understand the Transfiguration is like trying to understand someone else's dream.

The story of the Transfiguration is a turning point in the gospels. For the first time since his baptism, Jesus' divinity is revealed with the words, "This is my Son...." Peter, James and John—all three hear the voice, and in this moment we may think they understood what it meant. We don't know if they did or not. All we know of their reactions and thoughts were that they were afraid and Peter wanted to build three booths – one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. Peter did not intend for them to be permanent dwellings where they would stay forever and parcel out wisdom to those who made the hike up the mountain. Booths were temporary buildings, so maybe Peter did

understand a little because he knew the time would come when they would have to return to the rest of the world.

Like a dream, nothing in this moment stays forever—not the shining light or the luminous cloud; not Moses and Elijah; not the voice booming from the heavens or Jesus' whiter-than-white attire. None of it remains, except for Jesus. Jesus doesn't look any different to the other disciples when he returns to them. And more importantly he continues on the same journey he was already on. There's no sudden change of plans, no revelation of a secret mission or identity. He picks up the conversation where they had left off six days before—predicting his passion. And he also continues to cast out demons, heal and teach as he had before. Even the three disciples don't show more awareness or understanding of what is to come then they did before that moment burst upon them, causing them to fall to the ground.

So how do we grasp the truth of this story that seems to be just a break in the ongoing action? In both the moments of mystery as well as the mundane, Jesus remains the same. He is the beloved Son of God in his baptism, and he is the beloved Son of God on the mountaintop. He is the beloved Son when he is alone in the darkness of the garden, when he hangs from the cross, and when he is revealed again in glory at the resurrection. Jesus remains the same, reminding us that we do not need to be afraid.

We may not be afraid of these moments. Yet—we are often wary of them. It makes us nervous when we don't understand something. So we approach this story with some trepidation. But we do not need to be anxious about the parts of our faith that we don't understand. Even in those moments, Jesus remains the same. The grace of God is not given only to those who unlock the mysteries of faith and have a thorough understanding

of those unique moments. If that were the case Jesus would have stopped everything and stayed on that mountain with Moses and Elijah. And the voice did not say, “understand him” and give a pop quiz later on to see what the three disciples comprehended. The voice said, “Listen to him.” Listen to the word of the Word-made-flesh.

In times when we are unsure about our faith, unsure about what will happen in the future, we can hold fast because Christ remains the same. The beloved Son who came to grant us forgiveness and salvation does so not because of who we are or how much we understand of stories like the Transfiguration, but because he was the one born to save us from our sins. He was and is Emmanuel—God with us—in the unique mysteries of our faith and in the ordinary moments as well.

So we can come to this Table—where the ordinary is made extraordinary—not because we finally grasp some elusive truth, but because in Christ we are free to come to the Table. We are welcomed here in moments of doubt as well as moments of clarity. No matter where we are in our faith, Christ remains the same. In the moments of light and in the darkness, Christ remains the same. On the mountaintops and in the valleys, Christ remains the same, the beloved Son of God sent to set us free.

Analysis of Sermon Two

What is the focus of the sermon?

The focus of the sermon is that the Transfiguration is a story uniquely about Jesus.

What has the sermon’s function?

The function of the sermon was to remind people that Jesus is always the same and to encourage them in their faith.

What theological themes appear in the sermon?

The main theological theme of this sermon is the Incarnation of Christ. Throughout the sermon, we heard the words of Jesus' divinity as revealed in the words, "This is my Son, the Beloved." Christ is the Son of God in all aspects of his life, ministry, death, and resurrection. The phrases, "Word-made-flesh" and "Emmanuel, God with us" pull the listeners back to this truth and are woven throughout the sermon. The sermon concludes with the proclamation of Christ as "the beloved Son of God sent to set us free".

The grace of God is also a theme in the sermon. This theme is tied to the Incarnate Word, but it is also a truth proclaimed. It also serves to move us to the Table, proclaiming we come to it because Christ has made us free to do so.

How is the sermon proclamation?

The sermon does not try to explain what happened during the Transfiguration to Christ or to the disciples. Instead it focuses on proclaiming the truth that Christ was and is the Beloved Son of God. It is a sermon of that truth without trying to discuss what all the details in the story meant. The sermon tries to reveal the truth by focusing on the acts of Christ as the Son of God rather than in explaining them. "He is the beloved Son of God at his baptism, and he is the beloved Son of God on the mountaintop. He is the beloved Son when he is alone in the darkness of the garden, when he hangs from the cross, and when he is revealed again in glory at the resurrection."

Where is the gospel in the sermon?

The gospel is woven throughout the sermon. It could be said that the second sermon has the unfair advantage because it was written after extensive study in the area

of proclamation and biblical preaching, but that difference also shows how development of a theology can give a clear focus on what we say and how we say it.

In this case, the gospel is the statement that Christ is the beloved Son of God. Jesus doesn't become the Son of God when he was transfigured. He already was the Son of God. The story of the Transfiguration is a reminder to the readers of the gospel of that truth. The saving acts of God are also proclaimed in that truth, as they are in the fact that God's grace is given to us because Christ is our salvation.

The place where the gospel could have been more evident was in the conclusion—particularly in the reference to the Table. Perhaps it is not as strong there because Presbyterians tend to struggle with connections between Word and Sacrament, and the theological idea of proclamation as sacramental is still somewhat new to me.

Conclusion of the Analysis

As I stated in the introduction to this chapter, I chose the first sermon because I remembered it as being a strong sermon that was well received. While it may be viewed as good in some way—now I see it was mostly entertaining and focused on the people and their context—it was not proclamation. Not only that but because there was not a lot of exegetical work done or time spent dwelling with the text, it contains lazy theology. In an attempt to make the mystery of the Transfiguration understandable, the sermon comes dangerously close to heresy. Did I really compare Jesus to a superhero? My side notes for the sermon even contained a moment for me to physically remove my glasses and then put them back on as a humorous nod to Superman's alter-ego of Clark Kent. But doing so in is direct contrast to the belief that Jesus is both divine and human, not just a metahuman pretending to be normal. Looking back at the first sermon after taking

seriously the theology of proclamation written in chapter five, I cannot classify this sermon as a good sermon. It is not biblical and it is not proclamation of the good news.

In terms of biblical preaching, the second sermon has a strong focus on the text itself. I also kept the themes of the theology in front of me while focusing on the text and in the exegetical process. I admit that I could not resist some historical interpretation in explaining about booths, but I was able to use that to move the sermon along rather than shifting the focus of it. The second sermon's theme was clear and kept recurring in the sermon.

Comparing any two sermons is a bit like comparing apples and oranges, particularly when they are preached in different contexts. It would have been insightful to have been able to preach both to the same congregation and see what changes had occurred. Nevertheless, there are differences that have little to do with context and more to do with the shift in my own thinking about preaching. The second sermon is notably shorter than the first—although the first one is one of my more lengthy sermons—and yet the second one is stronger. It also had a clearer focus than the first sermon. It goes deeper into the text and holds to the truth that it set out to proclaim.

Developing a theology of preaching has also honed my exegetical skills. When the first sermon was written, my sermon preparation started with commentaries. I would choose whatever in them I wanted to pursue in the sermon. I spent very little time with the text itself. I would not think about whether the theme I was using was a theological theme I believed. With the second sermon, I did not look at commentaries until after I had spent a good deal of time with the text and had developed the focus and function for it based out of my theology for preaching. I looked at commentaries then only to affirm

that my reading of the text fell within that collective orthodoxy. Because I had developed a theology of preaching, I was able to focus the sermon on what I believed rather than just choosing a theme that sounded good at time.

CHAPTER SIX

REFLECTIONS

While working in curriculum development, I would lead workshops to help Christian Education Committees learn how to select the best curriculum for their congregations. I led the participants through an exercise to define their core faith values. The theory was that when a group knows its core values, it can find the best resources to use, prevent disconnect from occurring between Christian Education and the rest of congregational life, and to decrease teacher burnout. The premise behind the theory was that when we teach what we believe, we are more passionate about it.

The same is true for preaching. Throughout Scripture we witness people who proclaimed not just what they saw or heard, but what they believed to be true. We are called to do the same, but we cannot know what we truly believe if we do not intentionally develop a theology of preaching that is based on our core beliefs. We discover these beliefs by thinking theologically as we study Scripture and our doctrines of faith, and by reflecting on what those beliefs mean for our preaching. It is likely that some of our core beliefs occur naturally in our preaching, because we are shaped by these beliefs in our education and study. In *Preaching at the Crossroads*, David Lose says, “give me six months of the sermons of any preacher, and I’ll give you a clear and concise statement of his or her primary theological convictions.”¹¹⁷ I would agree that this would

¹¹⁷ Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads*, 39.

be the case to a certain extent, but unless the preacher has developed a theology of preaching it would be very easy for sermons in that six month period to hop all over the theological map.

The first sermon on Matthew 17 (discussed in chapter six) is an example of what can happen when there is no developed theology of preaching. There were plenty of examples in that sermon that did not reflect what I believe. Do I believe that Jesus is like a superhero, hiding his identity behind a carefully crafted alter ego? Of course not. Do I believe that we too can be transfigured to reveal elements of the divine? No, I do not. So why did I preach it? The simple answer is I was lazy when it came to theology and preaching. I did not see preaching as proclaiming. While I can say my motives were pure –I wanted to preach a good sermon–this lack of understanding led to a sermon that not only had no clear focus, but also one that contained statements I did not believe to be theologically true.

The second sermon contained a least two of my core theological beliefs: that Christ is the Son of God, and that he did come to set us free. It would be interesting to look at the sermons I write and preach in the next six months, and see if they would support a clear, concise statement of my theological beliefs. My guess is that they would not only because I have written a concise statement of my theological beliefs, but also because I intend to keep that statement before me during my sermon preparation. I believe that the work I have done on this thesis has not only helped me understand my theology for preaching, but has also led to changes in how I preach because the why of preaching is now showing through. In the rest of this chapter, I will reflect on how this

theology has shaped how I view the mechanics of preaching in style and voice, and what I believe needs to be the future of preaching in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Proclamation and Style

How we preach has been the focus of many preaching books in the PC(USA) as well in other denominational publications. From the move to inductive preaching in the New Homiletic to narrative preaching to conversational or interactive preaching, the focus has been on how to craft such sermons. Each advocate argues for how the particular style will enhance preaching, increase engagement with parishioners and help grow faith (which is in my view often a synonym for increased numbers). Congregations may have a preference on which style of preaching they prefer, but if the preacher is not proclaiming truths he or she believes in, the preaching is not proclamation. To paraphrase Paul, if we do not preach what we believe, we are nothing but talking heads and noisemakers. Conviction has a great deal to do with how the sermon is heard, and our passion comes not from the style of the sermon, but from its purpose—to proclaim the good news we believe to be true.

When I was young I went to the Hall of Presidents at Disneyland and was bored stiff! I grew up in a home where history was revered, as were several of the presidents in that Disneyland show. It wasn't the concept of the show that I didn't like, so what was it? Looking back I believe it was because they were automatons. Nothing about it seemed real to me, from their stilted robotics movements and lack of facial expressions to the flatness of the words being spoken. There was no passion or conviction in the words. If we had an actual recording of Lincoln giving the Gettysburg Address, I am sure that what

he believed would have come through in his voice, and perhaps then I would have been moved by the passion of his address.

The same can be said for our preaching and reading of texts, particularly if our focus is more on the dynamics of a style and less on what we are called to proclaim. We are called to proclaim the gospel and this proclamation contains within it belief and conviction. If we preachers do not believe the words we are saying, then we are like those robotic presidents. We can look the part, we can even mimic “presidential” styles of speaking, but our speech will be somehow flat and lifeless. Styles of preaching can only take us so far. We need our voice in order to proclaim.

Proclamation and Voice

One of the paradoxes of proclamation in this postmodern time is how to speak one’s beliefs while recognizing they are only one set of beliefs in a sea of many beliefs today. This has been a topic for discussion within the PC(USA) as a mainline denomination. The answer to this paradox has been to ensure that our preaching is authentic, so we as preachers need to ensure that we “find our voice”. This is not just a question of performance or oratory skills – which is important for any type of verbal communication. In proclamation, finding our voice means discovering the core theological truths we believe and letting those statements come through in our preaching. In other words, our voice for preaching comes when we preach what we believe and believe what we preach.

The pushback against this is that it can sound theologically authoritarian and like a throwback to the modern view that there is one absolute truth everyone should believe in. The theology of suspicion also leads us to be skeptical of any declaratory statement

that is made, even if we happen to agree with it. There is also mistrust because we have experienced how some people can master a sincere sounding voice that sounds passionate and truthful in the moment.

The authority of authenticity has done much to open up new possibilities for long-marginalized groups. But it also deserves scrutiny. It can be learned and so it can be faked. Consultants now offer to train business leaders in displaying their authenticity. And history is full of expert performances in which a raspy voice, a tear rolling down the cheek, and the most heartfelt eye-contact disguises what can only be called lies.¹¹⁸

In such a time, can any of us speak with absolute conviction on anything? I believe that when we confess in our preaching what we believe to be true, we are authentic and proclaiming with our own voices.

Proclaiming the Word does not mean we are mouthpieces for God to use. We are not mere vessels waiting to be filled with the Spirit before we can speak. We are not possessed so that the words and voice that comes from us are not our own. The prophets and prophetesses did not speak as God but spoke for God, and each had their own voice and style of speaking. Isaiah did not preach like Jeremiah or Ezekiel. Paul did not preach like Peter. They all had their own voices with which to speak. But despite their differences in style, words and even language, they all proclaimed what they believed to be true to God and to the ways of God. They found their voices in what they were called to preach. As preachers we can preach with our own voices. Indeed we have to, simply because we have no other voice! Our voices are the tool we use to proclaim the Word of God, and when we do so, the Spirit can move among us and the bones can live again.

¹¹⁸ *Questions Preachers Ask*, 66.

Proclamation and Power

One other challenge that faces us regarding proclamation is the issue of power. We shy away from proclaiming what we believe because we have turned the power of the pulpit into a negative thing. There is power in the words we use. We cannot deny that, but we often do and this has led to preaching as more of a sharing of an opinion than a declaration of truth. Our sermons may wander along as we invite people to follow our thought-process to the conclusion because we want people to feel like they've gotten there with us. There is nothing wrong with such persuasive speeches, but they are not proclamation. Our fear of the power in proclamation also comes from the abusive ways proclamation has been used. This does not mean that we need to strip the power away and use only words that are sanitized and safe. Instead, we need to confess the abuse and the misuse of preaching, and strive to use it in ways that are proclamation of the good news. For if we deny that power, we are denying our call as ministers of the Word. There is power in the words we proclaim, but that power comes from Christ who has authority over all things. We can preach boldly because the authority with which we speak is not our own.

Another struggle with the power of proclamation comes from an inflated sense of humility. Who am I to think God would call me to prophesy to these dry bones? Who am I to believe my words and voice are worthy of the task of proclaiming the good news? Those who preach every Sunday are not superior to those who serve in other types of ministry. Ministers of Word and Sacrament are not extra-special or holier than those who sit in the pews week after week. Our vocations are not more pleasing to God than the vocation of another. But in our haste to be like everyone else, to be just one member of

the team, have we lost the uniqueness of our calling? True, we are not better or worse than others, but no one God has called to proclaim has ever been anything but human. We preach because what we are called to proclaim is special. The gospel is news in any time and place, and we cannot deny that specialness or the power of it in our calling.

Preaching as proclamation means we have to take our task seriously. We have to honor the power that comes with such preaching and handle it with care. It is explosive. The good news can rattle the windows, blow off the roof, and turn the world upside-down. But when we try to make that news safe and “good” for everyone, we run the risk of saying no words worth hearing at all.

What is the Future of Preaching in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)?

In my readings for this thesis, I have been heartened by the fact that others are having the same conversation. The idea of homiletical theology and preaching as proclamation is still present among us. But most of the writing I have found on this subject has come from outside my denomination. In some ways in our denomination, preaching has been relegated to one competency among many and not prioritized. In a discussion held at the 222nd General Assembly in 2016, some of the panelists said that qualities like energy, risk-taking and entrepreneurial skills were the most desired qualities in a pastor.¹¹⁹ The Pastor Nominating Committee of one church I served as an interim was told by the executive presbyter not to check preaching as a skill desired, because in his opinion everyone said that but no one really meant it. Yet such committees continue to place preaching as a top skill they are seeking in a new pastor. In February of 2018,

¹¹⁹ www.pcusa.org/news/2016/6/21/mid-council-leaders-discuss-best-ways-helping-chur/

eighty-seven percent of seeking churches listed preaching and worship leadership as one of the ten competencies they desired in their next pastor.¹²⁰

Who is right, the mid-council leadership of the denomination or the congregations? I believe it is the congregations, not only because they would have gone through the process of defining that list, but also because at the heart of it all people still long to hear the good news (at least that is my repeated observation as a pastor and now as a mid-level executive on the Presbytery staff who has opportunity to worship with a good-many congregations). The proclamation of the gospel is still the main thing that we as clergy are called to do.

The purpose of preaching is not to provide a forum for the preacher – giving moral advice, expressing opinions on important topics, or listing religious “principles for living” – but rather to be the occasion for the hearing of a voice beyond the preacher’s voice – the very word of the living God.¹²¹

Yes, it’s important to equip the saints to do the work of the church. Yes, it’s important to develop and grow disciples, but I believe that work stems from the proclamation of the gospel. One of the ways the postmodern world has blessed preaching is that people no longer want to hear what they ought to do, but why they should do it. Proclamation of the gospel is the why.

It is time for us in the PC(USA) to shift our thinking where preaching is concerned. For too long we’ve been asking the question, “will it preach?” Is the style of preaching entertaining enough to keep people’s interest in a world of Twitter and Snap

¹²⁰ In the PC(USA), congregations seeking a new pastor complete a Ministry Information Form in which they choose ten competencies from a list from four areas: Theological/Spiritual interpreter, Communication, Organizational Leadership, and Interpersonal Engagement.

¹²¹ Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 25.

chat? Are we best utilizing technology and trends like TED talks to keep up with the Joneses (often viewed as the mega-churches and ministries of Rick Warren, Joel Osteen and others)? Will it preach? This was a question I would ask myself every week when I served in parish ministry. As I practiced my sermon I would focus on whether it made sense, flowed well and was interesting. None of these are bad things to reflect on—the techniques of oration are important to any public speaking—but I seldom stopped to think about what theological statements I was saying in the sermon.

The real question we preachers should ask is, “does it proclaim?” Different styles and methods are good, but is there substance beneath the style? Does the message we speak week after week proclaim the gospel? The proclamation of the gospel has always been part of our call in the Presbyterian Church, but now, in our day, it is also our challenge. In a recent speech to Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary Alumni, President Ted Wardlaw shared what he called the state of the church. We have entered into a new apostolic age, Wardlaw argued, where seminaries should be equipping graduates to be apostles, proclaiming the good news. I believe this is not just something recent seminary students should be practicing, but all of us who are called Ministers of Word and Sacrament should be proclaiming the good news.

This may be a new day for proclamation as the focus not only shifts to how to reach the “nones” in our world, but how to proclaim the news that is really new. The focus is no longer on affirming a denominational doctrine to those in the know, but how to proclaim the good news to those who have never heard, aren’t sure they can believe it and yet are hungry for hope. Likewise, it is a new time for proclamation to those who have sat in our pews for a long time, and yet have never heard the gospel proclaimed.

They are like the dry bones in Ezekiel's valley, waiting for a new spirit to revive them. That revival is not going to come through new programs and activities. The new spirit comes when we proclaim the Word instead of just speaking words.

Conclusion

An area of challenge I can see for developing a personal theology for preaching is that it could constrict or narrow our preaching to a select set of biblical texts that support our own personal agendas or opinions. The danger would be in the temptation to put the theology at the top of our sermon preparation just as we can do with topics or sermon series ideas. We Presbyterians tend to get tunnel vision at times and focus solely on one area or idea to be the solution to the problems at hand. My own experience with developing a theology for preaching has been quite the opposite. Developing the theology has not narrowed my focus, but it has sharpened it. It has not created a short-list of passages to preach, but has opened Scripture up and allows me to explore preaching texts that I had discarded in the past. There is gospel to be found in the harshest of Scripture, so we do not need to avoid those texts. For example, the story of Crucifixion may seem like a downer that does not contain any good news unless we jump quickly to the empty tomb. And yet, the cross shows the absolute love of God, that God was willing to even go to death in order to redeem us. That is not only good news, it is great news and that is what we should proclaim on Good Friday just as we proclaim it on Easter Sunday and beyond.

In seeing preaching as proclamation, there is freedom from the concern on whether people will get tired of hearing the same thing week after week. Every Easter and Christmas, preachers struggle to find some new angle or twist in order to keep the

story fresh. Our congregations have heard this before, they argue. They've heard it retold, enacted, explained or merely alluded to, but have they ever heard it proclaimed? Does the Easter Sunday sermon give them some new insight into the story and characters, or does it proclaim the Resurrection? Do people leave on Christmas Eve feeling sentimental over the lovely little story, or do they leave with the angels' words ringing true? Proclamation keeps the story fresh and alive because its focus is on the truth revealed and not merely on a rebooting of a story to reach the audience in a different way. Again, there is nothing wrong with telling the story in different ways as long as proclamation of the gospel is the focus of that story. As Gail O'Day writes, "When we understand preaching as proclamation instead of reclamation, we live into the conviction that all members of the gathered community, the preacher included, are equal, that all are one, in the same moment, in the same hope of transformative possibility, in the same delight in the surprise of the gospel."¹²²

In developing the theology of preaching as presented in the above chapters, I have been able to see how those theological themes are woven throughout the whole of Scripture and therefore I have become more intentional in my sermon preparation and exegetical work. Before I really thought about what it means to proclaim the good news in my preaching I spent maybe five minutes with the biblical text before moving to the commentaries and other sources to find the sermon material. Now I spend several days with the text, letting it speak to me. I have rediscovered the wonder of exploration in the Greek and Hebrew words, and that exploration and deeper understanding of my own beliefs have led me to view entire passages in a new light and to hear a new word. This

¹²² *Questions Preachers Ask*, 11.

has not only strengthened my preaching, it has nourished me as well. Karl Barth was right: “The true exegete will face the text like an astonished child in a wonderful garden, not like an advocate of God who has seen all [God’s] files.”¹²³

I have become that astonished child—amazed at the good news I discover in the text. It is this amazement that I want to share with others in my preaching. I want them to discover the same fullness and excitement when encountering the Word, and that can only be done if I am proclaiming instead of explaining. I do not believe this experience is only limited to me. I am not an exception in the role of preacher. The practice of developing a theology of preaching can be of a benefit to anyone who preaches. I would argue that it is essential for us in order to recapture our call to be ministers of the Word. In order to do that, we must fully engage with Scripture, explore our denominational beliefs and find our place as those called to proclaim among those beliefs.

My hope is to continue this conversation with others through workshops offered at the presbytery level. These workshops will be designed to help those who preach (clergy and laity) develop their own theologies to help strengthen their preaching as proclamation. I also hope to continue to write (in presbytery communications, and perhaps in journal articles and continuing education programs) on the subject as I continue to reflect theologically on preaching. I want to further explore the idea of proclamation as it pertains to other areas of ministry including proclamation in song, proclamation in worship and proclamation in service to others. I will continue to stand on the theology of proclamation I’ve developed as I preach and I expect that the work of this thesis will continue to shape my preaching whenever I re-enter parish ministry.

¹²³ Barth, *Homiletics*, 128.

As Ministers of the Word and Sacrament, we in the PC(USA) have always been called to proclaim the gospel. In this time of changes in the way we view our relationship with each other and the world, it is time to recapture that call. It is not enough for us to look at ourselves as counselor, teachers, event planners and team builders. As ministers, ours is a unique calling because everything we do and everything we say, we are to proclaim the good news of our Risen Lord until he comes again.

APPENDIX A

A BRIEF STATEMENT OF FAITH

In life and in death we belong to God.
Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.
We trust in Jesus Christ,
fully human, fully God.
Jesus proclaimed the reign of God:
preaching good news to the poor
and release to the captives,
teaching by word and deed
and blessing the children,
healing the sick
and binding up the brokenhearted,
eating with outcasts,
forgiving sinners,
and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.
Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition,
Jesus was crucified,
suffering the depths of human pain
and giving his life for the sins of the world.
God raised this Jesus from the dead,
vindicating his sinless life,
breaking the power of sin and evil,
delivering us from death to life eternal.

We trust in God,
whom Jesus called Abba, Father.
In sovereign love God created the world good
and makes everyone equally in God's image,
male and female, of every race and people,
to live as one community.
But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.
Ignoring God's commandments.
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation.

Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
 In everlasting love,
 the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
 to bless all families of the earth.
 Hearing their cry,
 God delivered the children of Israel
 from the house of bondage.
 Loving us still,
 God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
 Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
 like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
 God is faithful still.

We trust in God the Holy Spirit
 everywhere the giver and renewer of life.
 The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,
 sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,
 and binds us together with all believers
 in the one body of Christ, the Church.
 The same Spirit
 who inspired the prophets and apostles
 rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,
 engages us through the Word proclaimed,
 claims us in the waters of baptism,
 feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,
 and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.
 In a broken and fearful world
 the Spirit gives us courage
 to pray without ceasing,
 to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
 to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
 to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
 and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.
 In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
 we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
 and to live holy and joyful lives,
 even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
 praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"
 With believers in every time and place,
 we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
 can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
 Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Part 1: Book of Confessions*, 311-312.

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