Introduction

At Risk with the Text

Preaching is an audacious act. It has always been so.

I

It is audacious because the preacher stands up to make a claim that she has something new to say that the gathered listeners want to hear. That audaciousness is now acute, because it is no longer the case, as in the days of clergy monopoly, that the preacher might be the most learned person in town. Now, almost anywhere, the congregation teems with people who, in every dimension of our common life, know things well beyond the learning of the preacher. On all counts, the act of preaching is:

- *foolish* because in the congregation some know more and because in every congregation there are those ideologically committed in ways that preclude serious listening. As a result the preacher's utterance is already determined to be disputatious even before it is heard.
- *dangerous* if it is faithful, because the powers of retrenchment are everywhere among us, a passion to keep things as they were before the utterance. Ideological resistance is readily evoked in most congregations. And if not in the congregation itself, the rulers of this age keep a close eye on any proclamation that may disturb present arrangements. We have all read of the dangers of preaching in a police state where the preacher on any occasion is at risk and may be called to account. But even in our more-or-less benign democratic society such surveillance is not difficult to evoke, as witness All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, which has had its "tax status" called into question because of a preacher's critique of the Iraq war policy.

- a *risky self-exposure of the preacher, who at best is vulnerable in the precariousness of the utterance.* Every preacher knows with some regularity that what is said and what must be said inescapably expose the preacher as something of a fraud, for good preaching must speak truth to which the preacher's own life does not always attest. The preacher, with any self-awareness, knows of such incongruity, and of course every knowing congregation can spot the slippage between utterance and utterer. But such discrepancy is inevitable unless preaching is confined to the small truths verified in the preacher's own life.

Preaching is foolish, dangerous, and exposing, because what must be said in proclamation constitutes a daring alternative to the ideological passions that may be present in the congregation, to the powers that conduct surveillance, either inside or outside the congregation, and to the preacher's own sense of self. The occasion of preaching is risky on all counts, inherently risky because something other happens in preaching besides the echo of our preferred ideologies, our studied interests, or our personal inadequacies.

II

But if preaching is such an act of risk, then we rightly ask, Why do it with such regularity? Why enter that zone of vulnerability with such predictability? Of course there are cultural and historical expectations that preaching should happen and is scheduled to happen regularly. But there are as well serious reasons for preaching well behind cultural and historical expectations. On the one hand, there is the preacher's own vocational compulsion that this must be enacted. Such a preacher under compulsion is at deep risk if the preacher reneges on that mandate. Thus, Jeremiah knows, on behalf of all preachers who come after him, about the catch-22, to preach or not:

> For whenever I speak, I must cry out,
> I must shout, "Violence and destruction!"
> For the word of the Lord has become for me
> a reproach and derision all day long.
> If I say, "I will not mention him,
> or speak any more in his name,"
> then within me there is
> something like a burning fire shut up in my bones;
> I am weary withholding it in, and I cannot. (Jer. 20:8-9)

And Karl Barth is surely faithful to Jeremiah in his dictum:

> Here we are discussing our common *situation*. This situation I will characterize in the three following sentences:—*As ministers we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize both* our obligation and our inability *and by that very recognition give God the glory*. This is our perplexity. The rest of our task fades into insignificance in comparison.[1]

That vocational imperative on the part of the preacher of course is not a private matter and does not occur in a social vacuum. Beyond the preacher's deep impulse, there is the reality of the church, an alternative community that is evoked and sustained precisely by preaching.[2] The wonder of preaching is that people show up. Of course there are all kinds of reasons for that, all sorts of mixed motives and no doubt ignoble motivations among them. The mixed motives that propel the congregation to show up match the mixed motives the preachers have for living out their vocational impulse. In the midst of all that, however, there is no doubt an unvoiced wonderment in which the gathered listening congregation is not unlike the fearful, eager, desperate last king in ancient Judah, Zedekiah:

> Then King Zedekiah sent for him, and received him. The king questioned him secretly in his house, and said, "Is there any word from the Lord?" (Jer. 37:17)

We do not ask in futility; and when we ask, we are not sure what it is we are asking. We are, I suspect, half hoping that there is no such word, because we would rather have things as they are, even if the way things are is scarcely manageable.

Given all of that, however, we do show up with wonderment and inquiry. We show up to listen, waiting and half expecting that there will be a new word. We most often have not thought this through when we show up. But if we had thought it through, we would likely recognize our sneaking hunch that we cannot stay human if we attempt to live in a closed system of reality that is sealed against new intervention from the outside. We reach out, in fear and hope, to be addressed by newness, because we know the human spirit will wither if there is no address. And we do, in our unreflective shrewdness, know that most of the verbal noise around us is no serious address and for that reason has no chance of opening our closed system of reality to newness.

We show up like Zedekiah: Is there a word from the Lord? The king showed up to ask "secretly" . . . not unlike Nicodemus who came "by night" to Jesus (John 3:2). The king came because his city was besieged by the Babylonians, before whom he could not stand. The king came because his conventional "support system" and his "intelligence community" had exhausted their resources and had no clue. The king came because he hoped that his present dire circumstance did not need to be his final truth. The king came because he had heard whispered around him old memories of times past when YHWH had done saving miracles, and he hoped for yet one more saving miracle (see Jer. 21:2). In the midst of his dire circumstance and his devouring anxiety, he came in timid, desperate hope. That hope is fearful, partly grounded in a faith tradition, partly grounded in deep ambiguities of lived circumstance. Such hope is partly a theological particularity and partly a generic human impulse. Either way, the king showed up. He was ready to listen, even if he found the listening nearly unbearable, so unbearable that he took pains to establish "deniability" about having come to listen at all (Jer. 37:24-28). In the same way, I imagine, we show up for preaching, not unlike Zedekiah, half hoping, half fearful, embarrassed to be there, but half believing that our present circumstance of "weal or woe" is not the last truth of our life.

III

When we gather together, half in fear and half in hope, the preacher must speak. Preachers are tempted in that moment of utterance in many directions. The preacher is tempted to moralism, to "relevance," to entertainment, to conformity, to trivialization, to moral passion about the preacher's pet project or the congregation's needy circumstance. In the service of such temptations, we have developed settled rhetorical strategies, most notably "sermon introductions" and "illustrations" that are designed, for the most part, to narcotize the congregation and assure them that nothing odd will happen in this hour of utterance. But if the analogy of Zedekiah works at all, then we have not shown up for utterance in order to be entertained or numbed or instructed in the passion of the day. We have come to find out if there is a word from outside our circumstance, from outside our closed system of reality that could open the system—personal or public or both—to fresh air and new light.

The preacher, in such a mixed congregation of fear and hope, has a moment of speech. Even in our electronically overly busy world of Attention Deficit Disorder, the preacher has a moment. Without pretense and at

best without idolatrous claim, the preacher is to speak from "the other side," from out beyond our vexed or buoyant circumstance, from the ground of holy mystery, which for Jews and Christians has been concretized in Torah and in Jesus Christ. The preacher, even if too modest to say so, is authorized for this instant to say, "Thus saith the Lord," a formula that is credible only if the utterance squares with tradition, only if it is connected to lived reality, and only if it is transparently not allied with the peculiar passions and interests of the preacher.

If it is true, as now is commonly held, that the pivot point of faith in the Old Testament is the sixth-century exile, then we may take the *exile* as metaphor for the characteristic "human predicament" in biblical mode, a situation of hopelessness and homelessness, a sense of impotence about being able to change circumstance, and a bewilderment about how to be fully human now.[3] And if we take exile as characteristic context, then we may take *gospel* as characteristic utterance in exile.[4] The characteristic task and opportunity of the preacher are to assert, yet again, that the matrix of human *homelessness* is the very arena of divine presence whereby homelessness is made *home-filled*.[5] It is the presence of the God of the exodus and of creation, the God of Friday crucifixion and Sunday resurrection, who is declared to be among us who transforms exile into a livable human habitat.

That is the rhetorical transaction that occurs in the Old Testament in the sixth century among the displaced. Voices of *divine presence* are sounded in a context of *known absence*.[6] It is so in Jeremiah, the great prophet of divine absence:

> Thus says the Lord:
> The people who survived the sword
> found grace in the wilderness;
> when Israel sought for rest,
> the Lord appeared to him from far away.
> I have loved you with an everlasting love;
> therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. (Jer. 31:2-3)

It is so in Jeremiah's later contemporary, Ezekiel:

> I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. (Ezek. 34:15-16)

But it is, above all, evident in exilic Isaiah, the poet who transposes the word "news" into theological coinage. The Babylonian regime had eliminated YHWH as a force or factor in the public life of the empire by making clear to Jews that YHWH was no longer a strong power to save.[7] The defeated Jews had in large part accepted the elimination of YHWH and the dominance of Babylonian power and Babylonian gods, the power that controlled and the gods who did not care. The imaginative field of the empire, with all of its epistemological assumptions and its political-military exhibits of hegemony, had completely emptied the field of any possible action by YHWH. The memory and the hope of that God had been erased by imperial leverage. I believe that the same erasure of gospel possibility is largely in effect among us in the United States, where the domination system with its technological totalism is matched by its ideological force. There may be little "godlets" on our horizon, but any god-reference that might matter is largely erased from public awareness.

And then the poet, this vigorous, imaginative preacher so capable, found credible cadences that could break the dominant ideology; he was able to go behind imperial erasure to say something new that was apparently still recognizable to this homeless population. The only word he has for the world-shattering utterance entrusted to him is "gospel":[8]

> Get you up to a high mountain,
>   O Zion, *herald of good tidings*;
> lift up your voice with strength,
>   O Jerusalem, *herald of good tidings*,
>   lift it up, do not fear;
> say to the cities of Judah,
>   "Here is your God!" (Isa. 40:9)

The lean proclamation is, "Here is our God." The Jews had thought, if they engaged at all, that "our God" was nowhere available. But now "here," made here and made new by poetic utterance. In that moment of utterance it must have dawned on a few of the desperate faithful that if such a gospel can be uttered, then the imperial system is not as closed as we have been led to believe. The very utterance opened new possibility that the poet will present in terms of new exodus.[9] And with the hearing of new possibility, inchoate suspicion of the ultimacy of the empire begins to emerge.

This God, now on the lips of this poet in exile, can use the term "gospel" for self-announcement, which contrasts the future-creating capacity of this God with the gods of the empire, who can only maintain what was in powerless, hopeless shutdown:

I first have declared it to Zion,
and I give to Jerusalem a *herald of good tidings*.
But when I look there is no one;
among these there is no counselor
who, when I ask, gives an answer.
No, they are all a delusion;
their works are nothing;
their images are empty wind. (Isa. 41:27-29)

Bel bows down, Nebo stoops,
their idols are on beasts and cattle;
these things you carry are loaded
as burdens on weary animals.
They stoop, they bow down together;
they cannot save the burden,
but themselves go into captivity.
Listen to me, O house of Jacob,
all the remnant of the house of Israel,
who have been borne by me from your birth,
carried from the womb;
even to your old age I am he,
even when you turn gray I will carry you.
I have made, and I will bear;
I will carry and will save. (Isa. 46:1-4)

The assertion of news about Yhwh's reemergence begins to expose the hegemonic delusion that has loomed so large; there are the first stirrings of faith brought back to life, stirrings intended by the God who—it turns out—refuses to be erased by a totalizing empire.

The poet, in vivid imagination, can create a scenario of a messenger, a gospeller, who can run joyously and buoyantly across the sand of the Near East with the news that the God who had been defeated is the God who is back in force:

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the *messenger* who announces peace,
who brings *good news*,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." (Isa. 52:7)

The news is that the defeated God of Jerusalem has been restored to awesome power. The failed God of Israel turns out to be the newly enthroned

king-God, God of gods, Lord of lords, God of all the Babylonian gods, king of all imperial kings. In that poetic moment—and that is all it is—there is jubilation, the release of long-held despair, the affirmation of hope that they had not dared to hope (52:8-10). This is indeed a word from the outside, a word not uttered or censured by the empire, a word not imagined by the defeated, conformist, displaced Jews, a word that comes in the way of poetry that offers no explanation, no certainty, no accommodation to the agents of surveillance. It is a moment of utterance!

The moment will soon be past, and the listeners will have to return to "the real world," which is permeated with powerful signs of imperial control. Nothing out there has been changed—except that everything has now been changed by this poetic utterance, because *the poetry cannot be unsaid*, not by all the power and all the technology of "delete" and all the intimidators. The word has been uttered and the juices of alternative possibility have begun to flow. It is so succinct and guileless, the way of words the empire has not wanted to be uttered:

> Here is your God!
> Your God reigns!

They did not know they could come to hear this word. They wondered ahead of time if there was a word; but they did not know what word they wanted or what was possible. They did not know what the empire would permit or what was possible for the poet. They did not know ahead of time. But when they heard it . . . they knew! They recognized that the poet who said this word (a) spoke *from a tradition* of divine kingship that goes back to the Song of Moses (Exod. 15:18); (b) *connected to the lived reality* of imperial erasure and ersatz kingship in Babylon; and (c) offered utterance that was not *in the service of any vested interest* of the poet; if anything, it surely placed him in acute jeopardy. On all counts it was a word they, the most daring among them, could credit as true. And in that moment of poetic utterance, the erosion of imperial totalism got under way. The empire is helpless before such credible gospel utterance!

The utterance of God's speech in human articulation is news. It is the assertion of something not known until uttered. It is news hoped for, but hope jaded by the erosion of possibility and the force of imperial erasure. It is hope feared, because when heard, everything settled has to be revamped. It is news that announces that the world is other than we had thought. It is an utterance, an act of human imagination rooted in divine self-giving, that describes the world anew. Out of this threefold use of the term "gospel"

(Isa. 40:9; 47:27; 52:7) the completed utterance of exilic Isaiah (chapters 40–55) twists and turns the language, appeals to old images from the tradition and utilizes new images, all in the service of redescribing the world that is, according to the news, under new management, under the governance of the home-making, home-giving God and away from the deathly power of the empire.

It is a word that is designed to *console*. Thus, the first word is "comfort" (Isa. 40:1; see 49:13); the reiterated "fear not" is an assurance that the God of homecoming has overridden and nullified all the power of fear fostered by the empire and its gods (41:8-14; 43:1-5; 44:8). It is a word of forgiveness uttered by the God who blots out transgression and permits radically new beginnings:

> I, I am He
> who blots out your transgressions for my own sake,
> and I will not remember your sins. (Isa. 43:25)

But the word that *consoles* is also the word that *jars.* No doubt many among the displaced who had come to listen were fully ready to accept the world of Babylonian homelessness, had accepted Babylonian rule and had signed on with Babylonian gods—perhaps the prerequisite for economic well-being. And now the same gospel word is an imperative: "Depart, depart" (Isa. 52:11). The listeners were urged (compelled?) to depart from all that was by now familiar and comfortable. Given the new world now imagined in poetic utterance, there was a vexing offer of *comfort-with-disturbance,* both required to come to terms with the strange new world offered in gospel utterance.

IV

The prophet, Isaiah in exile, stood up in exile and offered this counter-utterance, as did Jeremiah and Ezekiel in exile before him. We may ask of them, as every preacher must regularly ask, "From where do they get such words?" Certainly gospellers like Isaiah in exile are generative, imaginative personalities, capable of lining out reality from the vigor of their artistry.

These good preachers, like every good preacher, do not, however, claim that their utterances are simply the fruit of personal generativity. These preachers, like all good preachers, know there is more, even if it is not easy to specify how the words are given. In the Old Testament, three modes of "explanation" are offered for the word that is other than one's own:

1. These utterers, like all good preachers, have "a sense of call," an experience and conviction that their lives have been impinged upon in decisive ways to claim their energy and their future for purposes other than their own.[10] Good preaching is a gift that is given, and given again, by redefining divine impingement, an impingement that wrenches one out of one's own assumptions. All three of the great exilic prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, operate with such a claim. Most studied is the call narrative concerning Jeremiah, a call that he resisted but eventually accepted, a call that culminated with a divine assurance of support:

> And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you. (Jer. 1:18-19; see vv. 4-19)

Most bizarre is the call report of Ezekiel who is summoned to and transported by a vision that completely dislocates him (Ezek. 1-3). Most elusive is the call of exilic Isaiah, though there are suggestions that the elusive language of Isaiah 40:1-11, addressed to "the herald of good tidings" (v. 9), is deliberately modeled after Isaiah 6:1-13 wherein the call narrative of the prophet is much more explicit. In any case, life is disrupted for this poet by a new purpose.

The notion of a "call to preach" is a familiar one to us. It has, however, been greatly routinized and institutionalized in much U.S. Christianity.[11] As a result, "call" is rather like a career path that assures one of institutional support, even including a pension plan. And of course this writer is among those who have benefited from such institutional support and pension. There is no gain in pretending otherwise. It is, however, worth more attention than we give it, that the call is a divine impingement of life-changing proportion that lives always in tension with institutional routinization. We talk easily about "the freedom of the pulpit" which is something of an institutional issue. Alongside that, however, we might also speak of "the freedom of the preacher," which is primarily a theological, psychological matter of being defined by an impingement that puts one at risk and calls one to foolishness and vulnerability (see above).

2. The arena of the call is regularly "the divine council," the place where the gods, in a polytheistic world, convene in heaven to decide about the earth, and then dispatch a messenger with the divine decree to earth.[12] This

is a poetic, imaginative formulation of what we may take to be a serious attempt to reflect theologically upon God's will being done "on earth as it is in heaven." The notion of "divine council" is most explicit in Jeremiah and hardly evident in Ezekiel. More than any other prophet in the Old Testament, Jeremiah is vexed with opponents who contradict his message and claim themselves to be legitimate prophets.[13] This opposition inescapably poses the issue of authority and the matter of contested truth. Of these other prophets, Jeremiah asks a defiant question:

> For who has stood in the council of the Lord
> so as to see and to hear his word?
> Who has given heed to his word so as to proclaim it? (Jer. 23:18)

He specifically asks if his opponents have had access to the truth of God as has he. And then he gives his answer, which is designed to discredit them:

> I did not send the prophets,
> yet they ran;
> I did not speak to them,
> yet they prophesied.
> But if they had stood in my council,
> then they would have proclaimed my words to my people,
> and they would have turned them from their evil way,
> and from the evil of their doings. (Jer. 23:21-22)

By implication Jeremiah's answer is not only that his opponents have not had access to the truth of the rule of Yhwh; *he has*, and therefore he must be heeded!

In Isaiah 40:1-11, it is noticed that the beginning of the address is a plural imperative, "Comfort ye," as in Handel's *Messiah*. If we ask who is addressed in the plural, the likely answer, reflected in the several voices that speak in vv. 3-8, is that the divine council is convened to plan and articulate the comfort of Yhwh to the exiles; thus, the summons of v. 1 is addressed to members of the divine council. And then in vv. 9-11, the gospeller is dispatched with news of regime change. The textual unit that introduces exilic Isaiah is parallel to Isaiah 6:1-13, where the interaction of the divine council is unmistakable. Thus, the two texts function in a twinned way for the two parts of the book of Isaiah to claim divine authorization beyond human imagination.[14] The poet-preachers are sent with a word other than their own.

3. The claim that this is a word other than one's own is encapsulated in the familiar formula, "Thus saith the Lord."[15] The formula is frequently used by the prophets to make the claim that the preached word comes from beyond the preacher. The formula is likely reflective of the way an ambassador speaks for the government she represents, a formula still often heard in the United Nations. Thus, for example, "My government urges that . . . ." A good ambassador does not speak his own word but states the policy position of the government that has dispatched him, and so speaks with the authority of that government. So the poets of the Old Testament who invoked the formula do not speak their own word, but the word of the one(s?) who send them. This means, inescapably, that the uttered word must be taken with great seriousness and must not be dismissed as the word of someone who is crazy (Hos. 9:7) or a traitor (Jer. 38:4). The word uttered is not so easily dismissed, even by those who want to stop both the consoling and jarring power of such utterance.[16]

These three formulations of authority—*call*, *divine council*, *messenger formula*—all converge into the claim that the word uttered is from out beyond the preacher. To be sure, the claim is not for that reason everywhere easily accepted. At the very minimum, however, it is crucial that the preacher herself should have some sense of that authorization and summons to a word beyond one's own word.

Now I understand fully that such a claim is not easily transposed into our contemporary preaching environment, not least because the claim so readily spills over into coerciveness and authoritarianism. The claim is exceedingly difficult, moreover, in a society that takes itself to be democratic, psychologically oriented, and prone to easy "therapeutic" communication. It is not thinkable, however, that the claim of preaching should be conformed to cultural mores, even as powerful as they are. Preaching must perforce be grounded more securely than in the easy assumptions of a consumer culture. Preaching, even if it be street preaching, is a preaching *from and in and for the church*. That means that the church, when it is faithful, is committed to being addressed by preaching that is not easily congruent with cultural assumptions; this conviction about preaching is dramatized in the more-or-less high claims of ordination that most church traditions practice.

Inside the life and faith of the church, preacher and congregation have a tacit agreement, assumed but not often enough stated, to engage in a speaking-listening interaction whereby the newness of God's purpose is made verbally explicit and available. It is for sure that many congregations

have little sense of this; I think it is equally certain that many preachers have little sense of the awesomeness of the transaction, and so it is diminished into trivialization of a dozen kinds. Rightly understood, the occasion of preaching requires both preacher and listening assembly to suspend many assumptions and to entertain the possibility that there is indeed a word other than our own, a word that comes from outside our closed systems of reality. In the word other than our own, the world is re-characterized, re-narrated, and re-described, shown to be other than what we thought when we came to the meeting.

V

There is no doubt that preaching is rooted in this transcendent claim, a claim that in Scripture is often articulated in an unembarrassed "supernaturalist way." There are, to be sure, other ways in which the transcendent claim can be evoked without supernaturalist formulation. But even given that, we may still return to the question, From whence comes that word? There is no doubt that the direct, personal, intimate impingement of God upon the preacher is crucial. It is equally clear, however, that the preacher does not operate *de novo*, as though the gospel has never been uttered before; rather the preacher stands in a long line of utterance that goes back to a text tradition.

We may take Jeremiah yet again as a case in point. The editorial introduction to the book of Jeremiah states the matter carefully:

> *The words of Jeremiah* son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom *the word of the Lord came* in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. (Jer. 1:1-2)

Most remarkably, this introductory, authorizing statement makes an important distinction. On the one hand, Jeremiah is the one to whom the word of the Lord came. This word of the Lord may be related to the foregoing discussion of the divine council. Jeremiah has been directly addressed and entrusted with "the word of the lord." But on the other hand, it is asserted that the book of Jeremiah that follows these introductory verses, the actual words of Scripture, are identified as "the words of Jeremiah." This careful hermeneutical statement clearly distinguishes between *the word of the Lord* that is given to the prophet and *the words of Jeremiah the prophet* that are

available to us in written form. The distinction makes the pivotal point that the words of Jeremiah, here the words of the book of Jeremiah, are not to be equated or identified with the word of the Lord. At the outset, the distinction warns us against a flat biblicism that equates Scripture with the word of the Lord. But more precisely for our purposes it is also suggested that the proclaimed words of the preacher are not "the word of the Lord." They are rather the words of the preacher that stand some distance from intimate divine impingement through the divine council.

That leaves for us the important and difficult question about the relationship between the word of the Lord and the words of Jeremiah, or variantly, the words of the preacher. The tradition of Jeremiah gives us no formulaic answer to the question, but we may see how it is that the prophet's words function in the book of Jeremiah. It seems clear enough that the connection between the two is made by a vigorous act of imagination that is rooted in the tradition and that is reflective of a definitive personal voice.[17]

It is Jeremiah's assignment from the God who sends him to give Jerusalem both words of judgment and of hope:

> See, today I appoint you over
>   nations and over kingdoms,
> to pluck up and to pull down,
> to destroy and to overthrow,
> to build and to plant. (Jer. 1:10)

Jeremiah enacts that twofold assignment in a variety of ways. Here I will delineate six aspects of "plucking up and tearing down . . . planting and building" that provide ways of thinking about the preaching task of jarring and consoling:

1. It is clear that Jeremiah, like any good preacher, is deeply informed by and engaged with a tradition of faith . . . in our belated case certainly textual, in his case probably textual. Broadly understood, the Jeremiah tradition can be understood as a poetic, imaginative practice of the textual tradition of Deuteronomy that likely was shaped a century earlier.[18] The Deuteronomic shaping of Jeremiah is well established; we may cite the use of the text from Deuteronomy 24:1-4 in Jeremiah 3:1-5 as a specific case in point.[19] It is clear that the extant textual tradition was used freely and imaginatively, but there is no doubt of textual rootage.

Beyond the textual tradition of Deuteronomy, we may notice how Jeremiah utilizes and exposits particular themes from the extant tradition:

a. In Jeremiah 21:5-7 the prose text appeals to the exodus tradition, though in a quite altered form, one that William Moran terms "anti-Exodus."[20]

b. In his famous declaration concerning new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34, Jeremiah clearly appeals to old covenantal—likely Deuteronomic—tradition. In the earlier part of my discussion I have suggested that the covenant renewal in this text is intimately parallel to Exodus 34:9-10, also a report on a renewed covenant.

c. There is no doubt that the well-known "Lamentations of Jeremiah" are derived from and play upon the textual traditions of the Psalms.[21]

d. The "royal promises" of Jeremiah 23:5-6 and 33:14-16 appeal to an older liturgical tradition, perhaps mediated through something like Psalm 72 with its accent on "justice and righteousness."

While the data could be multiplied, this is sufficient to make clear that prophetic utterance is textually grounded and informed.

2. Jeremiah's charge to "pluck up and tear down" leads him to mobilize the textual tradition with poetic imagination in order to articulate the theme of divine judgment and, consequently, Israelite loss. He does so through a rich panoply of images including marriage and infidelity (chapters 2–3), war (chapters 4–6), illness (8:18-22), remarkable stupidity (8:4-8), and a powerful, concrete pondering of coming death (9:10-22).

3. Jeremiah's charge "to plant and build" leads him to mobilize the tradition with poetic imagination in order to articulate the theme of divine promise and, consequently, Israelite hope. He does so through a rich variety of traditional images including land promises (see Jer. 32), the resumption of weddings after the rejection of weddings (Jer. 33:11), and the steadfastness of creation, perhaps an allusion to the post-flood promise of Genesis 8:22 (Jer. 31:35-36, 37; 33:25-26).

4. The theme of judgment ("pluck up and tear down") and the theme of promise ("plant and build") are articulated through daring poetic imagination that is textually informed. By exposition of these themes poetically through textual resources, Jeremiah radically redescribes the sixth-century historical world of his listeners. His act of *prophetic redescription* inescapably and by design serves to refute the dominant description of reality that was sponsored by the royal establishment and legitimated by the liturgical claims of the Jerusalem temple. Against the immense ideological force of

the Jerusalem establishment, Jeremiah works from a *countertext* enacted through a *counterimagination* that offers a *counterdescription of reality*.[22]

The key factor in the counterdescription that is the burden of textual preaching is that YHWH—the Holy One of Israel who is creator of heaven and earth—is a key player in the life of the world, even though YHWH as key player had been largely excluded or domesticated by dominant descriptions of reality. That counterdescription is everywhere committed to representing YHWH as the decisive agent in the life of Israel and in the affairs of the nations. On the one hand, that rearticulation of YHWH as a serious agent is done in terms of *judgment*, to assert that Jerusalem will be given over to Babylon by the will of YHWH. This countercharacterization of the fate of Jerusalem refutes the vision of the "'shalom prophets," who regard Jerusalem as immune to the threats and vagaries of history (see Jer. 6:13-15; 8:11-12; Ezek. 13:9-11).

On the other hand, the rearticulation of YHWH as a serious agent is done with the theme of *promise*, the assertion that the displacement of the Jews and the hegemony of Babylon are not the ultimate outcome of the historical process. The prophetic redescription is to assert, on textual grounds with daring imagination, that such worldly power is at best penultimate and will eventually yield to the purpose of YHWH, which is the restoration and well-being of the covenant community.

Thus, the redescription counters, by judgment, the *denial* of Jerusalem that was fostered by an ideology of exceptionalism, and by promise that counters the *despair* of the displaced. By the end of the text tradition of Jeremiah, the world is seen to be very different from the one vouched for in the dominant narrative; Jeremiah makes clear that the political-economic institutions of the city are fragile and the ideological claims that sustain the city reflect historical arrangements that soon or late but always will yield to the governing will of YHWH. The outcome of such proclamation, which is *tradition-infused*, *poetry-daring*, and *YHWH-focused* is a very different world, one that encourages the *relinquishment* of what was and the *reception* of what is now to be given by the power of YHWH.

VI

From this focus on the tradition of Jeremiah, I draw two further conclusions.[23] First, while the crisis of sixth-century Jerusalem is deep and urgent, it is astonishing that the Jeremiah tradition, for the most part, focuses not on "issues" but on the underlying reality of faith and unfaith, of trust and

idolatry. This is notably true of the poetry of Jeremiah; the matter is somewhat less clear in the prose materials, precisely because prose tends to devolve into concrete issues. On the main point, however, both poetry and prose cut underneath concreteness to the more elemental, relational matters. This seems to me an urgent matter for preachers, especially in a culture that is ideologically divided on every issue and in which faith is so readily reduced, by both left and right, to manageable, passionately held "positions" on the questions of the day.

Second, while I have taken Jeremiah as a case in point, the matter of biblical text as redescription is of course not limited to the text of Jeremiah. For the most part, I would insist that the biblical text is characteristically a redescription of reality with reference to the God of the gospel. Thus, creation texts intend to counter the more familiar narrative of the threat of chaos. The ancestral narratives of promise attest a future that aims to defeat the narrative of barrenness. The sapiential texts concerning the life-giving order of creation ordained by the creator intend to counter either the notion of the randomness of the world or the autonomy of human moral agents. The texts characteristically are at the work of redescribing and thereby subverting all dominant descriptions of reality.[24] It follows that where preaching is textual, that preaching is precisely *redescription of the world as God's world*, *away from denial and toward relinquishment*, *away from despair and toward receptivity*.

VII

The point of the above is to suggest that, faithful to the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament in particular, faithful to the apostolic tradition of the New Testament in particular, and faithful to the biblical tradition in general, the task of preaching is redescription of the world, with reference to YHWH by appeal to the text through poetic imagination that is connected to particular context. This way of putting the matter relates to the conviction, stated so well by Karl Barth, that the world to which the preacher attests is "strange and new," strange because it challenges conventional accounts of the world, new because reference is to God who makes all things new.[25] The further conviction that parallels this formulation is that most "acceptable" preaching in our society is an echo of dominant culture that remains without critique, so that even in the church there is a lack of awareness that there are alternatives available and that there are choices and decisions to be made.[26]

In ancient Jerusalem the dominant description of reality revolved around the conviction that (a) the temple is YHWH's permanent residence; (b) the monarchy is YHWH's chosen agent; and therefore (c) the city is safe from and immune to the threats of history. Mutatis mutandis, the dominant description of reality in U.S. society is that (a) democratic capitalism is the wave of the future that is sure to produce peace and prosperity; (b) the United States is God's chosen agent in the spread of the gospel of democratic capitalism; and (c) the United States is by divine assurance immune to the threats of history. In both ancient Israel and the current sense of self in the United States, there is a theologically rooted *exceptionalism* that imagines privilege and entitlement of idolatrous proportion.[27] It is this religion that is broadly assumed in our culture, and broadly assumed in the church that is, for the most part . . . in both liberal and conservative manifestations . . . content to live and work within these boundaries, without reference to the God who "plucks up and tears down, who builds and plants." By and large all of us, preachers included, have an economic stake in the narrative of the dominant description of reality.

Now I understand that most preachers in most congregations cannot frontally attempt to subvert that dominant narrative account of reality. Most preachers in most congregations have little inclination to take on big public issues on very many occasions, because in the life of the congregation most people are preoccupied with more personal and intimate crises that demand our energy and test our faith.

But if it is true, as I take as obvious, that the large dominant narrative of reality among us spins off in terms of social alienation and commodification of the most treasured dimensions of our personal lives, then the task of redescription and subversion is not necessarily or primarily focused on public issues or events. The local crises everywhere around us concerning family and health and jobs—crises that are the consequences of greed, anxiety, drivenness, loneliness, and violence of systemic proportion—in local venues are intimately connected to the big idolatrous commitments of our society.

Thus, the sense of the essays that follow in this collection reflect my growing conviction that the church is the last place in town—in many towns—where a sub-version of reality can be articulated that holds the prospect of an alternative humanness. There are limits to what any congregation can risk and is willing to risk; and there are limits in the congregation to what the preacher can risk and is willing to risk. Of course! But we should not despair. We have, in the U.S. church, spent a very long time ceding over our evangelical voice to accommodation, to an alliance with U.S. exceptionalism and a timid refusal to say what we know most deeply.

I imagine, then, that preachers and congregations now must think again, precisely because our characteristic evangelical notions of humanness are now under assault, and the forces that assault are largely left without critique among us.[28] Preachers and congregations will have to learn again that the news entrusted to us does not conform to a fearful moralism or to a brazen globalism, does not conform precisely because the God who is near at hand is also a God who is far off (Jer. 23:23). The text entrusted to the preacher and to the congregation is indeed a sub-version of reality, a *sub-version* that intends to *subvert*. It has always been so. It was so the night that Zedekiah came to Jeremiah to see if there was a word from the Lord. It was so before that, when Pharaoh came in the night to Moses and said, "Bless me" (Exod. 12:32). It was so after that when Nicodemus came to Jesus at night and asked about a second life (John 3:4). It is always so. Preachers have that hidden text that wants daylight.

The interaction is very much, always again, like the interaction between the king and the prophet in Jeremiah 37:

- There is *an asking* if there is a word from the Lord:

> Then King Zedekiah sent for him, and received him. The king questioned him secretly in his house, and said, "Is there any word from the Lord?" (Jer. 37:17)

- There is *an awareness* that speaking or not speaking that word is painful:

> For whenever I speak, I must cry out,
> I must shout, "Violence and destruction!"
> For the word of the Lord has become for me
> a reproach and derision all day long.
> If I say, "I will not mention him,
> or speak any more in his name,"
> then within me there is
> something like a burning fire shut up in my bones;
> I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. (Jer. 20:8-9)

- There is *a recognition* that the God who occupies the text is not user friendly:

> Am I a God near by, says the Lord, and not a God far off? (Jer. 23:23)

- And where spoken, where heard, where acted, *new life comes*, new life to the preacher, new life to the congregation, new life to the city:

> The voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord:
> "Give thanks to the Lord of hosts,
> for the Lord is good,
> for his steadfast love endures forever!"
> For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the Lord. (Jer. 33:11)

The fearful fact is that most folk do not sense how subversive the text is. The good news is that they nonetheless expect the text to be played out in their presence with imagination. The further good news is that folk still show up for text time. And the more there are texts that are well rendered, the more folk show up. In all our fear we still hope for what may be "strange and new" among us.

> For those who know it best
> seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.

It belongs to the preacher to meet that hunger—with the bread that nourishes so that we may "never be hungry" (John 6:35).