Chapter 1 

Choosing Preaching Words

How do we choose preaching words? It is a pertinent question for our time. We live with a glut of words. Books of words are available in hard copy, on CDs, on e-books, and online. Our public buildings and our personalized earphones pipe musical words into our ears. Words via radio commentary are always available. Televised words, in flat-screen format, fit on drugstore checkout countertops, in hair salons, and auto-oil-change waiting rooms. And the Internet keeps us connected to worldwide words: the e-mail, blogs, podcasts, tweets, and social network postings are the particles floating around us at all times. We are now sensitized to this air quality. What are preaching words in the midst of all these words? How do preachers choose words? What will guide our choices?

A few years back a certain churchman, Robert Hovda, was already keen on this issue. Hovda observed how difficult it is for ministers leading worship to edit what comes out of their mouths. He diagnosed the problem: too many ministers sound like the loquacious extremes of talk-show hosts. Hovda declared that ministers should practice "the custody of the tongue" in our culture of incessant commentary.[1]

I think of Hovda's phrase and want to use it this way: the custody of words. For preachers, word choice is an action of custody, or, better, custodianship. I do not mean custodianship in the sense of property rights but in the sense of caretaking. We are custodians of words when we wonder about the best way to say things for a particular gathering of people. What words will make sense to this group of persons? What

speech is too harsh? What is not strong enough? We are custodians of speech when we scrutinize daily speech and decide what speech we will borrow. We are custodians of speech when we sift through all the words available to us to find gospel words. Preachers are custodians of holy speech.

This is not easy work. Preaching still carries negative connotations for so many people. It means moral repudiation, an argument, a lecture, a shaming. It is still used pejoratively: "Don't preach at me!" Tell someone you study preaching and you will get a raised-eyebrow response. It sounds antiquated, tedious, or at best imperious.

What are we doing?

Let's start with a look at language. We'll begin with an expansive view of language: preachers are like *all* other human beings—we communicate. Then we will adjust the aperture and examine how preachers are like *some* other humans—we are careful about the words we use. Then we tighten the focus and look at preachers as *a unique group* amidst humans—we choose certain words to proclaim good news. This chapter gives an overview of the ways that preachers work with words.

Choosing Communication

Human beings choose to communicate, and we have worked at this for a long time. Museums around the world protect centuries of evidence of human communication. You can visit the replica cave of Lascaux, France, or an official Web site about it to see how these Paleolithic humans from 40,000 B.C.E. interpreted their surroundings through depictions of humans, animals, and constellations of the night skies. These cave images are evidence that before written language was invented, humans used pictures to communicate. The tombs of the Egyptian kings are similarly like an underground still shot but this time of royal court activities, the life of the gods, and daily life in the land of the Nile. The Egyptians also gave us a regulated pictorial form of a written language that we call hieroglyphics. These messages from 3000 B.C.E. were undecipherable until the late eighteenth century, when the discovery of a block of stone known as the Rosetta Stone revealed the key. The stone was inscribed with three languages, one of which was Greek. Thus, an eighteenth-century scholar was able to make connections between that script and the hieroglyphic inscription. Many scholars believe the cuneiform language of the Sumerians in Mesopotamia is even older than the Egyptian's hieroglyphic script. Researchers still work

to date early Chinese and South American scripts. We humans have been at the work of communication for a long time.

Some more recent accounts of language acquisition bring the profundity of communication closer to home. For instance, in William Gibson's play *The Miracle Worker*, the audience meets Helen Keller, who has been without sight or hearing from the age of a year and a half. We meet her just at the time she is brought to a teacher who will break through her isolation. This teacher, Annie Sullivan, uses her own fingers to form certain repeated gestures in the palm of Helen's hand. Again and again Annie will place Helen's hand on an object and then make specific patterns in Helen's hand. One day Annie and Helen are at the water pump to refill a water pitcher, with Annie holding Helen's hand under the spigot as she works the pump. Annie again and again spells the word in Helen's palm: w-a-t-e-r. And then it occurs: the moment of comprehension when Helen connects the gestures patterning her palm with the substance coming from the pump. Now she links the word spelled out in her hand to the object.

Things have identifiers: What we sit in is a chair. What we sleep on is a bed. What we put on our feet are shoes. Communication has happened. At this level of communication, words are our currency for exchanging information. A chair is a chair, a bed a bed, and shoes are shoes. So now we take these identifiers and begin to say things about them. We exchange the currency of words and we express ideas, state opinions, and make our needs and desires known: The chair is uncomfortable. The bed is identical to my sister's. I would like to buy those shoes.

In our time we know that this language-currency work starts right away with babies. The dominant progression of language acquisition occurs at least from infancy, to some extent before that, as the developing fetus begins to recognize the voices most often heard or the music played. Then from birth the baby is immersed in the bath of sights, sounds, gestures, tastes, smells, and touch. All of these associations combine in the child's brain to form the language by which the child will negotiate the world. The child learns the particular alphabet and the number system of her culture, and begins to read and calculate.

Words are a primary means of human interpersonal connection, and we work at making ourselves clear. Persons with certain sensory, physical, or cognitive disabilities—those who are differently abled—make use of augmentative communication methods to achieve careful and exact use of words. Some persons use a sign language that is as full and dynamic as

spoken language. Some persons sip and push air through a straw to command their electronic keyboard to serve in place of their vocal chords. Some use picture symbol systems—a picture of a desk means it is time to sit and work, a lunchbox means it is time to eat. Some nod or blink or move their eyes left and right, no and yes, to answer questions asked of them, even to spell out words.

Humans choose to communicate. There are many ways that we work to learn language and to learn new languages. Some of us use augmentative communication devices to help us communicate according to the common spoken language. Some of us learn another country's language in order to facilitate our travel or work. Some of us learn languages in order to read ancient texts. Some of us learn a different language in order to sing particular music. We learn language specific to our jobs enabling us to work in a particular industry. Some persons work to communicate with animals. Others spend time sending communications beyond our planet. Even vows of silence are in service to communication with God or self. We work hard to live a languaged life: to express ourselves and absorb what others are saying to us.

Choosing the Right Words

But language, like all other aspects of life, can overwhelm us. Godfrey Reggio's 1983 film *Koyaanisquatsi* has enjoyed long-term popularity in part because it captures this frenzy of life. Though the film begins with time-lapse sequences of nature (clouds, flowers), it eventually depicts human life and then accelerates to show the untenable human pace that is now so far from the rhythms of nature. *Koyaanisquatsi*, subtitled *Life Out of Balance*, explores imbalance.

Preachers are like all other humans because we participate in the rhythms of communication. But we are also part of a select group of people who know about the excess of words. These days our version of *Koyaanisquatsi* is that tens of thousands of words pass over our lips and through our fingertips. This many and more catch our sight or feelings and find our eyes, ears, and brain. Whether we hear, see, speak, type, text, scan, sign, feel, or fax, we have word choices to make. But preachers keep watch for imbalance. We are like some other people who discern between words that are worthy and words that are demeaning. We are careful about what we say.

In the church we have a history of discerning amongst our words. Attention to good speech is summarized in the psalms, those biblical words that

have been prayed regularly through Judeo-Christian history. For instance, the church's tradition of Morning Prayer begins with Psalm 51:15: "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise." Here the psalmist petitions God with voice offerings instead of burnt sacrifices. And Psalm 141 is one of the appointed psalms for Evening Prayer: "Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips" (v. 3). Of all the things for which Christians could and do pray, the inherited tradition places prayer about our very own speech at the start and end our days.

John Chrysostom, a fourth-century preacher known for his use of language, describes how we can wander far from God's ways in between these times of prayer. And topping his list is not one but two references to human speech. Chrysostom reminds us how to go about our days:

> Let each one go to his affairs with fear and trembling, and so pass the time of day as one obliged to return here [to church] in the evening to give the master an account of the entire day and to ask pardon for failures. For it is impossible even if we are ten thousand times watchful to avoid being liable for all sorts of faults. Either we have said something inopportune, or have listened to idle talk, or been disturbed by some indecent thought, or have not controlled our eyes, or have spent time in vain and idle things rather than doing what we should. And that is why every evening we must ask the master's pardon for all these faults . . . then we must pass the time of night in sobriety and thus be ready to present ourselves again at the morning praise . . . [2]

Even in the fourth century, there was concern about the influence of language.

There are other psalms that depict the power of words. Two psalms in particular give us categories of harmful speech—types of speech to avoid as we make our choices:

> My companion laid hands on a friend
> and violated a covenant with me
> with speech smoother than butter,
> but with a heart set on war;
> with words that were softer than oil,
> but in fact were drawn swords. (Ps. 55:20-21)

Psalm 55 identifies what we can call *false speech*: speech that is not congruent with the speaker's real motivation. The psalmist describes a violator who speaks smoothly but whose intentions are violent. There is great discrepancy between word and deed; the deeds do not match the words. You and I know these people: they are all around us and they describe us, too. This is not a model for preaching speech, but a reminder never to speak in this manner. Instead, we want congruity between the speaker and the content of the words—we want integrity.

> My enemies are saying wicked things about me,
> asking when I will die, and when my name will perish.
> Even if they come to see me, they speak empty words;
> their heart collects false rumours;
> they go outside and spread them.
> All my enemies whisper together about me
> and devise evil against me. (Ps. 41:5-7, *Book of Common Prayer*)

Psalm 41 illustrates *slanderous speech*. The psalmist describes enemies who gossip and tell lies, whose speech is destructive. Recall your high school experiences (a sort of petri dish for this type of speech). Or think about the ubiquitous reality television shows in which we are invited to be voyeurs, watching some people prattle on about each other and gossip and tell lies in order to promote themselves. Gossip may appear lighthearted, but it always hovers at the edge of slander—words that intend to damage a person's reputation.

And there is the speech that is *outright lying*. The one lying knows the truth and chooses to create an untruth. It is a choice to persuade others to believe a falsity. It is speech that hopes to get away with something. The one lying hides the lie and so is very careful and intentional about falsifying the truth. Saint Augustine categorized lying into eight modes. Seven of these modes he says are not real lies because they were only told in order to reach a goal. But Augustine says this: "The lie which is told solely for the pleasure of lying and deceiving, that is, the real lie."[3]

We can take our cues from these psalms about good speech and harmful speech. But these days we have at least one other category of risky speech. Because these days speech is also used to create a *brand*. A brand is a product that is given superpower. And words are key to this superpower. Words tell us that a product has the power to make us

younger, thinner, stronger, and wealthier. To buy that product is to buy into its world. This type of speech shapes how we shop. It is speech that has a slogan but does not necessarily follow through on its promises. The mop doesn't really soak up the spill, the diet soda isn't really nutritionally sound, and the credit card doesn't really pay for sunshine at the beach. The brand creates desire, and we want to live the life it promises. We are surrounded by slogans that promise more than they can deliver. Can we make sure that our preaching words are not perverted branding—religious packaging that lacks content? The prophet Jeremiah accuses people of this type of speech: "They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (Jer. 8:11). Branding creates an illusion; the prophet admonishes us instead to speak truthfully about what is.

It is unlikely that any preacher or student of preaching would intentionally use harmful speech. But some might be tempted. These categories of harmful speech describe the gossip, slander, speech devoid of action, lies, and false promises that surround us every day. Preachers are human and these aspects of human language might find their way into pulpit speech. So it is important to identify these harmful forms of speech. We make a choice not to use harmful speech. It is the careless speech described by the author of James, "So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits" (James 3:5). It is the speech that Jesus warns against: "I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matt. 12:36-37). Preachers are among those who choose words carefully. We know that words are harmful and can break us. We share the work of choosing the right words.

Choosing Resurrection Speech

But preachers work to do more than simply choose the right words: we choose words that communicate resurrection speech. The resurrection appearances in the four Gospel accounts give us a place to begin.

The resurrection appearance at the end of Matthew's Gospel describes Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. Jesus greets these women. They fall at his feet and worship him. And then he instructs them not to fear but to go and tell his brothers to meet him in Galilee where he will appear to them. This part of the resurrection account is called the appearance, but it also includes Jesus' instruction to the women to

"tell." In Matthew this appearance is followed by the commission to the disciples—they, too, are to go and tell. They are to use specific words as they baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (28:19).

In the Gospel according to Luke, the women go and tell the disciples that Jesus has been raised from the dead. The two men at the tomb remind the women that Jesus had spoken of his resurrection while living. Though Jesus does not appear to the women to send them to the disciples, it is their remembering Jesus' words as they stand at the empty tomb that prompts them to return to tell the rest the news. Then there is a twist, we are told, for the apostles do not believe the women: "these words seemed to them an idle tale" (24:11). Yet this account is followed by Jesus' appearance to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. The two disciples speak with the stranger about what had happened over the last three days. And in the breaking of bread they recognize him. They recall "our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road" (24:32).

In John's account Jesus appears to Mary at the site of the empty tomb. She is weeping and Jesus speaks with her, finally uttering her name. In that moment she knows him not to be the gardener but her Lord. And Jesus says to her to go and tell his brothers. She returns and announces that she has seen Jesus and relays the words he had passed on to her for their hearing.

It is the other Gospel, the other Synoptic account that does not categorically fit with these appearance narratives. In Mark, it is not Jesus but the young man at the tomb who tells Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome to go and tell the disciples that Jesus will meet them in Galilee. Also, there is a command to tell of Jesus' resurrection, but in this account the women do not tell the disciples (16:8). It is key to note that this Gospel account begins not with a birth narrative but in Galilee. This is important because this is the same Galilee that is the place of promised appearance. With these words the reader has come full circle, and now the entire Gospel is a resurrection account and we are the ones who see the Lord and now go and tell.[4]

At first glance then, Christian speech, according to Scripture, is to go and tell this good news: *Jesus Christ is no longer dead but is risen*. Notice that the news is proclamatory (an announcement), it is contemporary (it is the present reality, not past news), and it is for the future (the news has repercussions). Just looking at the patterns of the four different Gospel

accounts tells us some things about resurrection speech. But preachers do not simply stand up each Sunday and repeat verbatim these Gospel accounts. Reiterating Scripture is not what we mean by resurrection speech. So what is resurrection speech?

Resurrection Speech Has Particular Content

Resurrection speech in its first sense refers to the content of preachers' speech. This means that as preachers our words follow the death/life pattern that is witnessed to in the Gospel accounts. The church continues to claim that Jesus Christ has conquered death by his death and that he bestows life on us, on the whole world. God is a God of new life and by the power of the Holy Spirit, this new life is working on us and in us and through us now. It is not just new life for after-life; it is new life for our regular lives now. The church continues to profess that death is not the last word; God acts to bring about new life. We call this resurrection speech by different names. We call it gospel and we call it good news.

But new life comes out of death. Resurrection speech names both the death and the life. The church does not separate Good Friday from Easter Sunday; the cross and the empty tomb are mutually definitive. The cross tells what powers are put down by the empty tomb; the empty tomb is defined by the powers of the cross that it negates. Our preaching words follow this pattern. We name the powers that are life denying, violent, and that wield death. Resurrection speech must include both sides of the death/life pattern of the Gospel accounts.

Here are four implications of this for our preaching words:

1. ***Resurrection speech is textual because we work with the words and events of biblical texts.*** Preaching is not simply Bible study time during which we study particular texts and explore their application for our lives. The nature of preaching demands more. The texts are scrutinized for how they speak to both the power of death and God's power of new life in our midst. Sometimes the text will speak more clearly to death than to life, or vice versa. But resurrection speech is our interpretive lens and we study the text, its setting, even its rhetorical path (for example) for ways that it speaks death and life. Conversely, our resurrection speech is given particular contours because of what text/s we work with. We won't say the exact same thing about death and life each week because we work with different texts. We won't say the same thing about our needs and

the world's brokenness each week because each text points to a different aspect of loss and need and despair and to different aspects of life in the face of these deaths.

2. ***Resurrection speech is contextual because it is speech shaped for particular hearers.*** Preaching is not the reiteration of the biblical texts, and it is also not the reiteration of creedal statements or theological sayings. The sermon is one of the places in the order of worship where the words are intentionally dialogical—shaped by and for a particular context. There are other places during our communal worship where the repetition of certain phrases and responses has deep power. But preaching is constantly contextual. It is not just death in general of which we speak. It is not just life in general of which we speak. Preachers pay close attention to their context and the events of their surroundings (local and global) and make congruous connections between the claims of the biblical texts and what is going on that week in our hearers' midst. For example, as I write this, worldwide economic turmoil and cross-country business downsizings—or "right-sizings"—are current deaths taking their toll. What are signs of new life in the face of these deaths? We look for them. They may not be apparent yet. And we name that, too.

3. ***Resurrection speech must pass the "So what?" test.*** Preaching speech does not mean that the preacher uses scriptural or theological sayings as a slogan, as if invoking a biblical word or making a theological point fixes everything. Resurrection speech, preaching that deals honestly with our needs and wounds and deaths and death-dealing ways, will not give way to an easy fix. We do not toss off an easy "Jesus heals" saying or a simple "God rescues us" pronouncement. When preachers find the good news words arising from a particular text we make sure we wrestle with them. We make sure they can stand the "So what?" or the "How does this make a difference?" test.[5]

4. ***Resurrection speech shapes us for resurrection life.*** There are three insights related to this statement. First, the death/life pattern is central to a whole constellation of related patterns. You recognize the words: justice, mercy, righteousness, love, community, faithfulness, wholeness, grace. Second, resurrection speech does not send us to relax on the couch all day but intends to shape us for a life of service. It is not speech intended

to secure our individual borders, though it bears that fruit, but is for each of us as a member in the whole body of Christ. And third, it is speech that shapes us for life now, not simply life after death. Today we are made new. Today we are members of Christ's body—signs of God's love in the world. This speech shapes us to live life according to its life-giving pattern.

Resurrection Speech Has Particular Effects

I have been describing resurrection speech, its definition, and the contours of its content. But here is a second meaning of resurrection speech for preaching: it is speech that causes us to see and live in the world in a new way. We want preaching to change lives and change the world. We want not only to see what is tangible but also to see what is possible. In order to do this we work with words in a particular way. This book is about language but is also about a specific type of language: *imagery*.

Imagery is the type of speech that elicits an experiential connection, a sensory memory, or recognition. We can use it interchangeably with *evocative language*, which is the umbrella that has gathered under it metaphors, similes, personification, analogy, synecdoche, allusion, metonymy, and even stories and illustrations. Preachers use imagery in a fashion similar to poetry:

> Poetry is not simply communicating information, though that may be entailed. Poetry happens when two realities are compared in such a way that an ethos shift occurs. As is frequently the case, the poet of Amherst puts the matter best. She sees that some realities are so large, some mysteries so deep, that they can only be told slant.[6]

Imagery is the type of language used to tell things slant.

Here are some preliminary things to know about imagery as we begin our study of evocative language in the pulpit:

1. ***Imagery is necessary and is different than informational language.*** Informational language is language that tells us who, what, where, when, and how by the use of straightforward terms. We call 911 to report a traffic accident, and we must give as many of these details as precisely as possible. We use language to convey facts and details. Imagery, instead, is about connecting to memory, feelings, and life experiences. It is language that evokes emotion and aesthetic response. It is the type of language we

reach for because we know the "magnitude and particularity of the subject defy description."[7] Imagery, compared to informational language, is not a lesser form of language but is a different form of language. We now know it even forms in our brains differently. One author, writing about neurological discoveries concerning the use of language, makes this distinction: "There is stylistic importance of logical argument and testability in science. Literature is often trying to prove something too, but characteristically convinces us by evocation of emotion and aesthetic response—limbic functions—along the lines of Keats's 'Beauty is truth, truth is beauty.'"[8]

2. ***Imagery is specific and is different from abstract, conceptual language.*** Abstract language includes words like grace, salvation, forgiveness, sin, and redemption. These may be the vocabulary words of the church from biblical texts, prayers, and hymnody, but they are large concepts. Justice, love, freedom, hunger, war, and trauma are more examples of abstract conceptual words. Imagery strives to show what these concepts look like in our lives so that we connect with their realities. Freedom, this morning, looked like a Muslim woman in a blue headscarf in Urumqi, China, as she denounced communist rule in that country's far western region and rallied people to join her shouts of protest against regional government beatings and deaths.

3. ***Imagery is evocative and is different from denotative understandings of language.*** Denotative use of words focuses on dictionary definitions or original meanings. Imagery may be used to show us what these denotative meanings look like. But more often imagery is connotative—it is less concerned with our recollection of an exact meaning of a word and more interested in connecting us to the lived-out meanings of the word. A dog may be a four-footed creature that belongs to genus *canine*, but I will think of Inky, the Black Labrador/Irish Setter mix who let two elementary school-age sisters snuggle him like a pillow.

Imagery is not optional for preaching. It is not an additive to conceptual or theoretical writing. It is how our minds work to make sense of life. We are hardwired for evocative language. In chapter 3 there are lists of long-term practices for growing our evocative linguistic capacities, as well as exercises for the weekly work of sermon preparation to strengthen use of images in sermons.

Before I turn to those practices, however, we will take one more step back for another expansive view of language. This time, in chapter 2, I will take up the question of what our words do in sermons with an overview of contemporary theories of language.

For Further Reading

Brueggemann, Walter. *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989. The acclaimed Hebrew Bible scholar invites preachers to the land of poetic speech.

Frankfurt, Harry G. *On Bullshit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. Frankfurt approaches the topic in order to develop a theory of its existence and to investigate its ongoing presence in human speech.

Hilkert, Mary Catherine. *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination.* New York: Continuum, 1997. Hilkert approaches preaching as the opportunity to build our imaginations and tune us to see God at work in our midst.

Lischer, Richard. *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. This book is the published collection of Lischer's Lyman Beecher Lectures in Preaching at Yale Divinity School. Lischer looks at the overabundance of words in the world and challenges the words we use for preaching.

McEntyre, Marilyn Chandler. *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009. This is another text that analyzes word use in contemporary cultures. McEntyre issues an urgent call for our precise and caring use of words.

Taylor, Barbara Brown. *When God is Silent.* Boston: Cowley, 1998. In her 1997 series of lectures for the Lyman Beecher Lectures in Preaching at Yale Divinity School, Taylor evokes the need for words that speak to truth. She names our hunger for real words, our overuse of words, and the need for our restraint with words.