

Every time Scripture speaks—when it is read or employed in preaching—it is powerful because it finds the “same old way” to say a new thing. The text—in its plain, evident, mysterious self—speaks. It speaks directly to us, engages us on its own terms just as it did to its first hearers and as it has to every hearer since. But we must let it speak to us as text. We must let it surprise us.

The power of Scripture lies not in our amazing reconstructions of the terrain or landscape of any past context—not even the original one. That ground has slid forward, moved on. The power of Scripture is in the encounter that happens when the called body of Christ reads and hears it again, as always, for the first time. We do not try to plant the flag of Scripture in the ground in order to establish for all (or even any) time what it means. We carry the flag of Scripture with us and at each new encampment in each new context, we fly it from the center pole of the tent and marvel at how, against every new landscape, it surprises us with new colors and hues. We revel in the words of Scripture not to get at the historical or psychological or sociological realities behind them, but to be surprised by where we will find ourselves *in* them this time.

The sermon ought not be an exercise in explaining what the text means or meant. The Scripture is read and words and images explode into the worship space. And before the dust can settle, before the church can collect all the phonemes and phrases and reassemble them into comfortable order, the sermon begins. And our fond hope is that the sermon will bear God’s surprising word for every new context. Some call for that surprise as a way to protect the sovereignty of God to say something new—even something we’ve been taught to believe Scripture isn’t “allowed” to say. Others call for that surprise in order to undermine meanings established by the powerful, often at the expense of the powerless. Still others call for surprise as a way of reclaiming the literary character of open-endedness.

This explosion of hearing, thinking, and imagining is the text for the sermon. When someone asks a preacher, “What text are you preaching on?”, the wrong answer is to say, “Luke 18:1-8.” The correct answer (though a bit more cumbersome) is this: “My sermon text is the irreducible and unrepeatable phenomenon that will occur when I read Luke 18:1-8, in the midst of the liturgy, the morning after who-knows-what in the news, into the singularity that is this community camped here for a time—in whatever condition they and the universe happen to be.”

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