

Preaching as Contextual Truth

Each believer seeks to know and love God through the very particular struggles and joys that make up the idiosyncratic realities of lived experience. Christian proclamation is a relational kind of “local theology.”¹ We testify out of what we know, and communities hear words of accountability and grace most deeply if they sense that they are known by the preacher. Preaching can be a “show,” to be sure—a visiting preacher can put on a virtuosic performance that captures the imaginations of strangers in an unfamiliar sanctuary. But most effective preaching is local. Incarnational theology invites preachers to honor as holy the material truths of specific contexts, including the truths of real congregations where they are.²

Biblical voices, too, testified to theological insights and challenges that were highly contextual. When the preacher blurs the distinct witnesses of Amos, Ezekiel, and Deutero-Isaiah through a careless formulation about “*the message* of the prophets,” the congregation misses an opportunity to hear the plurivocality of testimonies about who God has been in differing circumstances of stability, trauma, and reconfiguration. I guide hearers into the differences among the Gospels because the invitations of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are so gorgeously compelling in their differences. (One must avoid academic jargon, of course, and not make the point too directly, or someone in the receiving line will be compelled to object that it was not “the Matthean Jesus” but *actual* Jesus who spoke in that Gospel.) My commitment to honoring ancient contexts—political, theological, literary—is rooted in the conviction that preaching should invite hearers into Scripture as sacred polyphony.

I don't tend to elucidate readings of Scripture from the history of interpretation in my preaching. Rather, I utilize the insights of theologians past in two ways: first in my preparation, as a means to broaden my own understanding of interpretive possibilities; and second, as a treasury of images and insights that, curated with attentiveness to contemporary context, may bring clarity to a congregation's encounters with Scripture.³ Among countless gems in interpretive tradition are Augustine's "Our heart is restless until it rests in You," a profound articulation of the connection between idolatry and yearning for God; Julian of Norwich's vision of God's love for creation, which delights believers with a glimpse of the sacred in the unassuming hazelnut; and George Herbert's lines about the agony of Christ, "Love is that liquor sweet and most divine / Which my God feels as blood; but I, as wine," an astonishing way to trope the paradox of divine pathos in the economy of redemption.⁴ Steering well clear of a systematic review of theological doctrines, I prefer to work as a *bricoleuse* with the history of interpretation, pressing "found" insights and formulations into the service of biblically focused proclamation.

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¹ See Nora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997). Tisdale urges preachers to attend to local dynamics in every congregational subculture, from the urban parish to the small country church to the prison congregation. Tisdale suggests that exemplary preaching involves a process of "exegeting the congregation" and argues that the preacher should work creatively with indigenous expressions and forms, yielding a homiletic that resembles folk art.

² Preaching logics, forms, and emphases specific to particular communities have regularly been explored in homiletical literature. Even while declining any notion of essentialism regarding believers, regions, and traditions, the preacher will profit from consulting works such as: Evans E. Crawford, *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995); Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); Bettye-Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Woman Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997); Eunjoo Mary Kim, *Preaching the Presence of God: A Homiletic from an Asian American Perspective* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson Press, 1999); John Wesley Zwomunondiita Kurewa, *Preaching and Cultural Identity: Proclaiming the Gospel in Africa* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000); Justo L. González and Pablo A. Jiménez, *Púlpito: An Introduction to Hispanic Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005, with contributions from six others); Olive Elaine Hinnant, *God Comes Out: A Queer Homiletic* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2007); and Cleophus J. LaRue, *I Believe I'll Testify: The Art of African American Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011).

³ A series valuable for homiletical preparation is *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, edited by Hughes Oliphant Old (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans): *Vol. 1: The Biblical Period* (1998); *Vol. 2: The Patristic Age* (1998); *Vol. 3: The Medieval Church* (1999); *Vol. 4: The Age of the Reformation* (2002); *Vol. 5: Modernism, Pietism, and Awakening* (2004); *Vol. 6: The Modern Age* (2007); *Vol. 7: Our Own Time* (2010).

⁴ See Augustine's *Confessions*, Book I.1.1 (trans. Henry Chadwick; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 4; Julian of Norwich, *Showings* (trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh; Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 183; George Herbert, *The Complete English Works* (ed. Ann Pasternak Herbert; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), "The Agony," p. 34.