

Proclaiming the Gospel in Turbulent Times

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How do you begin to speak about the turbulency of our times? Clearly, much could be said about the recent tragedies or about the war that we find ourselves fighting in Afghanistan. Perhaps we have seen enough of these things on television for me to bring them to your imaginations now by merely alluding to all the devastation you have viewed in the past six weeks. What does the Gospel of Jesus Christ have to say to a world that is torn apart and at war? But, if you can remember, weren't our days also turbulent and chaotic even before September 11. What does the Gospel have to say to a world so fragmented that it is largely indifferent to an institution like the Church? And, how do we speak a word of hope or peace or love to a society that gets its moral guidance from The Jerry Springer Show. What do we say in the face of the media influences of an industry that broadcasts to the entire world a mere ten miles from this very spot? How do we speak a godly word to a culture that is characterized by rugged isolationism, rampant consumerism and materialism, increasing pluralism, and relative morality? The shorthand for all of this, of course, is post-modernism. I don't want to go into what this means, because, as you know by now, there is no agreement as to how to define it. But, to say that we live in post-modern times is a way of describing the chaos and fragmentation of our world. Another way to put it would be to borrow an image from a recent book written by my doctor father, Charles Bartow, *God's Human Speech*. He refers to the ancient Chinese proverb that says: "May you live in interesting times." Whatever you might want to say about our turbulent times, they certainly are interesting. How do you proclaim the Gospel in times as interesting as these?¹

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I won't attempt to describe our times in any detail this morning, but, in good homiletical fashion, let me illustrate how times have changed with a story. Perhaps you have heard homiletician Tom Long tell this story about the great Presbyterian preacher, George Buttrick: Several decades ago, Buttrick was riding on a commercial airliner and writing intently on a yellow legal pad. His seat mate interrupted him, saying "I hate to disturb you, but you certainly seem to be working awfully hard on something."

Buttrick replied, "Yes, I am a preacher and I am working on this Sunday's sermon."

"Oh, religion," the man said. "Well, I don't really like to have everything so complex and theoretical. 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,' the Golden Rule, that's my religion."

"Oh, I see," said Buttrick. "And what is it that you do?"

"Well, I am a professor at a university. I teach astronomy."

"Oh, astronomy," Buttrick said. "Well, I don't like to have it all so complex and theoretical. 'Twinkle, twinkle, Little Star,' that's my astronomy."

It is a new day. We don't merely take the word of experts in a given field any more. All truth, we are told, is up for grabs. Old fashioned notions of institutional value and educational merit no longer hold. What is right is relative. What is real is immeasurable. The virtual and the real are as hard to sort out as a photo of a smiling tourist standing atop the World Trade Center with the image of a Boeing 767 heading directly for the building beneath him. If that well publicized photo were real, it would be a picture taken one second before the plane bearing one of the pastors of Christ Church Oak Brook, Jeff Mladenik, was subsumed within the first tower. But, is it a true photo or a clever juxtaposition of two independent images? Truth, it seems, is no longer something that can be captured in a photograph or discovered in a laboratory, or taught at a confirmation retreat. It is to be determined experientially and it's different for every person. As Richard Lischer

reminds us, “We postmoderns take for granted the fragmentariness of life and belief. We have all but convinced ourselves that things aren’t supposed to make sense. We understand—sometimes all too well—that the Christian message is only one voice among many. [The previous] generation still sought a formula that would encompass revelation and modernity.”² Lischer tells of Scottish preacher James Cleland who in a sermon once told the story of “an old Scott who heard a liberal preacher stand up in the pulpit and disprove the existence of the devil. After the sermon, the fellow turned to his mate and said, ‘Man, I feel I have lost a personal friend.’”³

These are turbulent and interesting times in which traditional institutions, like the Church, are not trusted as they once were. But we dare not, as Stanley Grenz has warned, “fall into the trap of wistfully longing for a return to the early modernity that gave evangelicalism its birth, for we are called to minister not to the past, but to the contemporary context. . . .”⁴ How then, do we proclaim the Gospel in such interesting times? How do we speak the faith of Jesus Christ in such a way that we help to establish what our colleague Eddie Gibbs is calling Church Next?

In answer to this question, I want to do three things: I want first to assert that we do not give up on our message. Second, I want to point toward the power of one timeless mode of communication that will still speak, even if the world thinks it is not listening. And, finally, I want to indicate what it means from the perspective of contemporary preaching, to get the message right.

The Relevance of the Gospel Message

Here is another way to frame the question: Is the Gospel relevant to Generation X? In short, the answer is no! No, the good news of Jesus Christ is not relevant to Generation X or to Generation Y

² “‘Blessed are the Debonair’: James Cleland as Preacher and Homiletician, Duke Divinity School publication of an address delivered there on April 11, 2000, p. 9.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. 10.

or to the Baby Boomer generation or to the “greatest generation” or to any other that has ever existed. The Gospel has never been relevant to culture because it has always been counter-cultural. If the good news Jesus preached in his day were not so subversive, it would not have gotten him killed. It did not relate then, although there were some who listened to its story. And there were a number who found themselves compelled to tell the story, in spite of its cultural opposition. Not a few of *them* got killed for it, too. Far from being relevant, the Gospel, it turns out, is actually *offensive*.

This is the nature of the story of Jesus Christ. Sooner or later, it offends everyone. If you as a preacher always find yourself on the side of the Gospel in your preaching, look out. You are probably reading it wrong. We should all be offended by the Gospel from time to time. It is not only a healing word, but also a challenging word that disturbs our culture and pushes us in directions we do not want to go. As a timely example, let me ask you this? Are you supportive of the war on terrorism? Do you believe in the great historical doctrine of Just War? Is it not our right to defend our country from such heinous threats? Then how do you feel when you hear these words from a friend of America who writes from South Africa about what it means to seek for peace? His name is Peter Storey, a man some of you met when he visited our campus last spring. He sent an email to his friends in America on September 14th reminding us that “to weep with Jesus over the city's pain is our pastoral imperative, but to do so without asking his deep questions about the "things that make for peace," is dereliction of our calling.” He goes on to talk about the stupidity of relying on the “outworn weapons of war” and concludes by saying that because more deaths will only add to God’s tears, we as preachers “must bear our witness to another way.” It is not easy to agree with all that my friend has to say. But, he is speaking the Gospel message of a Christ who taught us to love our enemies and pursue things that make for peace. It is easy to be troubled by his words because he is speaking an offensive Gospel to those whose first instinct is *not* to turn the other cheek when

nation, family, and life are so ruthlessly threatened. Maybe you are offended by these words. If so, my friends, rejoice, because then, perhaps we are starting to get it right. Is the Gospel relevant to today? Is it relevant to Generation X? Is it relevant in a time of war? No, it certainly is not. It never was. The Gospel doesn't care if we live in the Dark Ages, or the Renaissance, or in the Modern Age, or in Post-enlightenment times. It stands over-against every culture and every human instinct. It is not relevant. But, it is needed and proclaiming it rightly, in all its bold offense is our calling as preachers and pastors of the Church.

The Power of the Story

Of course, many will argue that proclaiming the Gospel story has lost its power to shape people today. We live, as Grenz reminds us, "in the age of the demise of the meta-narrative."⁵ People's attention span is too brief. We need, people say, to find new modes for communication so that we become a relevant voice that can compete with everything else that is grabbing people's attention. Perhaps you haven't noticed it yet, but in many places, sermons are about the only things that *aren't* interesting these days.

As my second point, I want to argue that we need to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ, even though it isn't relevant today. Can we do so by merely telling the story, as we have always done? Will the people listen? Can a meta-narrative like the story of God's love for God's people still shape and transform a world? I want to assert strongly, that it can and that, because it is so counter-cultural, it must. The Gospel is not relevant, but it certainly is applicable to our times because it is, we believe, the only means of achieving a planet of peace. I submit that we do not give up on story as our means of communicating the Gospel. Surely, we can use every good means at our disposal to tell the story. I tend to agree with a postmodern practitioner whom you may have

⁵ Ibid, p. 45.

read about in the cover story for a recent issue of *Time Magazine*, The Rev. T.D. Jakes. He is a fiery Pentecostal preacher who says that “the rules are, get the message over any way you can. The more tools you have, the better it is.”⁶ With my students, I like to put it this way. “Any form that is truly in service to the Gospel *is* proclamation.” But, whatever tools we use, our goal is simply to tell the story.

I have said that the Gospel story is not relevant to Generation X. But, will new generations listen to the story? In an age of the demise of the meta-narrative, will story still have the power to shape us and give us identity? If we had more time, I would gladly unfold for you some of the work in the field of homiletics in the past twenty years that has to do with the topic of story and narrative preaching. (And I know you would be fascinated if I did!) What my homiletical colleagues continue to argue is that story is precisely the form that captures human attention and creates the possibility for transformation, even today. I believe this is true—partly from what I read, but also from what I observe. About a year ago I sat alone at the breakfast table with my son, Jacob. You may have spotted him as our cross bearer today. He is a thoroughly postmodern lad. He never knew an age without the internet. He watches cartoons called “Two Angry Beavers” and “Sponge Bob Square Pants.” At breakfast that morning, he looked up from his bowl of Fruity Pebbles and asked me a question: “Dad, have you told me all of the stories about the things that happened when you were a kid?” Who am I, he was asking. Where do I come from? And how do I relate to this weird and interesting world? It doesn’t matter how relative people think the truth is or how suspicious they are of previous modes of revelation. Without the story, they have nothing to deconstruct: nothing to rebel against, or react about, or stand in opposition to. Even in an age where everything seems to be relative and it feels like we live in very interesting, highly turbulent times, the story will have power. That is why we preachers still do as we have always done. We tell the transforming story and trust

⁶ T.D. Jakes, as quoted in “Is This Man the Next Billy Graham,” by David Van Biema, *Time Magazine*, September 17,

in the Holy Spirit's power to work it into people's hearts and change their lives. Of course, getting that story right is crucial. How to do that is my final point this morning.

Getting the Story Right

How do you know if you are getting the story right? What is the measure of your preaching. Do you rely only on the words of the parishioners on Sunday morning? If you do, beware of the person who says, "You know, Pastor, each sermon is better than the next." Those who preach for any length of time will discover that while the listeners have some general sense of whether or not they like your style, the measure of your preaching to shape and transform their lives is hardly something they can attest to immediately. It is usually not a single sermon that changes someone, but, as Richard Lischer says, the slow transformation that comes through listening to seasons of preaching. "Preaching is not," he reminds us, "a virtuoso performance, but the language of the church that accompanies the laborious formation of a new people."⁷ What, then, should be your measure? I suggest these three things: Transformative preaching is deeply biblical, honestly contextual, and positively evangelistic. If your preaching has these three characteristics, you are probably getting the story right. Let me say a brief word about each of these.

Preaching needs to be deeply textual. The problem here has been nicely stated by one textual preacher: "If the biblical verse chosen as a text had smallpox, the average sermon would never catch it."⁸ It would be impossible to count all the ways that the text is misused or only slightly used or totally abused in preaching. But, they all stem from the same suspicion that the Bible has nothing of real value to say to people today. If preachers mistrust their primary source, then there is no reason for people to trust them. A preacher's opinions may be interesting, but only insofar as everything is interesting these days. We *live* in interesting times. But, they are also deeply fractured times and the

2001, p. 52.

⁷ Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching* (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1992), 79.

only way to speak a word of healing to the nations is to speak a godly word. Such a word comes from God's Word. As I said earlier, it may not be relevant, but it certainly is applicable.

To get the Gospel story right, we need to preach sermons that are deeply textual. By this I mean that we take exegesis seriously and treat the scriptural text as rich soil from out of which will grow a rugged and nutritious plant. I emphasize here the word "deeply." The text is not a *resource* for preaching. It is not a warehouse of interesting stories and theological statements. It is not one of many texts that may be informative or useful for comparative analysis. The text is not a resource: it is *the* source. It is the soil from which preaching grows. Our sermons must sink deep roots into that soil so that when we speak, it is God's story that is told and no other. Karl Barth is still the expert here:

*The Gospel is not in our thoughts or hearts; it is in scripture. The dearest habits and best insights that I have—I must give them all up before listening [to the text]. I must not use them to protect myself against the breakthrough of a knowledge that derives from scripture. Again and again, I must let myself be contradicted. I must let myself be loosened up. I must be able to surrender everything.*⁹

Yes, let us be contradicted, and surprised, and offended by the text. When we are, then the word we choose to speak will be in total service to God's Word which will "remain sovereign and free and thus be able to take its own course."¹⁰

Transformative preaching is honestly contextual. Getting the story right means that it gets the textual issues right. But, the Bible story is only half of the narrative equation. The other half is the people's story. Biblical preaching will take the text seriously. *Pertinent* preaching will take the *context* seriously. There is no use in preaching sermons that are high-powered, but misguided missiles. I

⁸ James Cleland, as quoted in "Blessed are the Debonair": James Cleland as Preacher and Homiletician," by Richard Lischer, Duke Divinity School publication of an address delivered there on April 11, 2000.

⁹ Karl Barth, *Homiletics* p. 78.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

won't often be found quoting from politicians (except Lincoln, perhaps), but our President used a line recently that aligns so well with my metaphor I will risk it. In reference to the tactics being considered in the search for shiftier terrorists, he said: "What is the point of shooting a two million dollar missile at a ten dollar tent that is empty?" As preachers, our target is the people who gather in our tent, our place of worship. This is where we aim. Our target is not some other imagined people, nor a pastor's previous congregation, nor a journal audience for which a busy pastor writes, nor even the radio or television audience that might happen to tune in. The only human story that matters in preaching is the story of those who show up for that face to face exchange that we call the sermon. One of my students recently put the issue to a fellow preacher with great clarity. "You preached a very good sermon today. But, I kept wondering, what difference does it make?" That is the question. The Gospel can heal and offend anyone. How does it transform and challenge the actual persons that attend to it in this particular time and place? The preacher's job is to get that part of the story right, too, if her preaching is to make a spiritual difference to the listener. Preaching needs to be honestly contextual, so that the Bible story which we strive to get right will intersect with the people's story by crossing a thoroughfare that bears the wheel ruts of genuine human traffic. (The same could be said of worship, by the way. Our hymns and songs of praise need to bear the marks of getting the human story right and not merely being nice songs about me and Jesus. What we more than likely need are more psalms, for that is where the truth about God and humanity are most vividly and evenly portrayed in scripture. Another Fuller preaching student stated the issue vividly. "I'll start trusting more in worship when we start to hire Lament Bands to lead the music.")

Transformative preaching is positively evangelistic. Getting the story right means that in preaching, we explore the text deeply, we survey the context honestly, and we are positively evangelistic. I hasten to define what I mean by this adjective before I pursue my real purpose, which

is again, to speak briefly about the adverb. I mean “evangelistic” in the sense that all preaching is evangelical. It is about the Greek *euangellion*, the evangel, the Good News about Jesus Christ. Preaching that gets the story right will be *positively* evangelistic. That is, it remains positive and doesn’t negate the power of the story. Much of the preaching we hear tends toward a use of the text where the death of Christ is an accident and the cross is a mere footnote. If the story of Jesus is only about what a good and godly person he was, it doesn’t matter that he died on the cross. If we should be kind and loving out of gratitude for a Christ who first loved us, then the only transformation that will change us is the kind that comes from New Year’s resolutions. But, though we may be able to accomplish that occasional “senseless act of random kindness,” it is not in us to make them constant, intentional acts of grace. We only achieve grace through the power of the One who died on the cross. Therein is our power for godly living. If we don’t understand that, and preach that, we will never get the story right. Preaching that is positively evangelistic is preaching that is truly good news for people who cannot change themselves. We must rely on God for this, if we are to make any headway in a turbulent, highly interesting world. Perhaps the best way to put this is the way that Peter Storey did when he lectured to my preaching class last spring. He said, “The night before you preach, read through your sermon. If it is not filled with Good News, then tear it up.”

Conclusion

There you have my three points for proclaiming the transforming story in a fragmented world. Please excuse me if they do not sound particularly fresh or novel. They are, in fact, the standard approach that has served the Church well for centuries. To be deeply textual, honestly contextual, and positively evangelistic will not sound new unless you do not strive to achieve pertinent, biblical preaching. But, that is the only kind we teach here at Fuller seminary. In fact, it is

the reason why I am here. In my interview for this position, faculty member asked me a question that I had heard at no other seminary, and I interviewed at a great many. “Can you tell us what you think about Christ centered preaching?” I replied rather simply: “Frankly, I don’t know of any other kind.” Art DeKruyter would agree with that.

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