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SURVIVING THE SERMON PREPARATION PROCESS

Preaching a sermon is relatively easy. Preparing one worth preaching is what is difficult. Like Elijah in the cave, we wait for the Divine voice. We look everywhere for the Word. Often, the more we look the less we find.

Through the years I have been given advice at great length-- told where to look for sermon possibilities: through disciplined Bible study, in my pastoral experience, on my knees, at the theatre, in the paper, in my lying down and my rising up.

Now, of course, we have the lectionary...look there. But the problem remains, for, alas, the issue is not where; it is what. Would we be instructed by the p. s. attached to the bottom of that very old recipe for rabbit soup: "First, you catch a rabbit"? Partly, but unfortunately, that advice won't quite suffice either. The issue is not simply that of catching the homiletical rabbit. The issue is whether you can intentionally, and inadvertently allow the rabbit to catch you. And that is what this brief essay is about--how to intentionally and inadvertently allow the homiletical rabbit to catch us.

I venture this in spite of my long-held suspicion--a suspicion lacking incontrovertible evidence to be sure--that most folks who tell others how to get started in the sermon

preparation process either do not really know how it is that they do it, or they do not seem to follow their own advice. The issue is, after all, the most elusive part of the homiletical art--and clearly the hardest to teach. Most of us know several options regarding the shaping of a sermon--if only we had something to shape.

You remember that moment, when someone close to you steps into the middle of your sermon preparation with: "How are you doing for Sunday?" You respond: "Not well. Nothing seems to be happening." Later the person returns with the same question--and out of an entirely different world you exclaim: "I think I have something!" (It probably would be more accurate to say that something has you.) But the inquirer is not content--wants more data: "What is it that you have?" Your initial reaction is to ask the person to leave, and quickly--because your only honest reply would be "I don't really know yet, but something is working."

Our question here, then, is simply: How does one prompt, tease, evoke, claim, provoke, or facilitate that uncertain certainty: "I think I have something"? Actually, we will take the matter one step further, asking--once we arrive at that moment: How can we keep alive that almost euphoric epistemological experience before it turns to pale platitude? How do we live with it in the context of further preparation?

or our purposes here, we will presume that the preacher begins with a text--lectionary or otherwise.

The preparation process begins, obviously, by gaining an effective familiarity with the text to be utilized. Otherwise form will not follow function. This "effective familiarity" involves a peculiar blend of knowledge and mystery, of grasping and being grasped, of managing and being led. It is easier to say what it is not than what it is--although most of us know when it is happening well.

Numerous traps await the preacher in the preparation process--traps which hide homiletical rabbits and often prevent those preliminary "ah ha" experiences that forecast productive homiletical work. Several traps can be identified easily. In the process of exploring several traps to be avoided we will attempt also to identify techniques that might prove helpful in successfully surviving the preparation process.

Because the first task in sermon preparation is to listen to the text, it is important not to be up-staged by expert helpers who will give us answers to questions we have yet even to ask. I believe too many preachers (lectionary followers in particular) turn much too quickly from a first reading of the text to brief commentaries so easily available. Understand, I am not quarrelling with exegetical assistance. Indeed, without it, text turns to pre-text and what might have been biblical preaching

turns into manipulative topical preaching. Exegetical assistance is an indispensable part of biblical preaching. But its time is not now.

Since our first task is hearing, it is important to position ourselves in such a way that we really can be open to listen. Our intention to plan a sermon is commendable--and inevitable, for Sunday is fast approaching. Yet, our task at this early moment in the preparation process should be to set aside our intentionality in favor of that possibility of inadvertent surprise. We already have enough trouble imposing our own agenda onto a text. Right now, let's not impose others' agenda either.

Instead, I suggest we read the text out loud, repeatedly--and in as many differing translations and paraphrases as we have available. It is particularly helpful to read the text in the original language if possible--not yet for purposes of exegetical scrutiny, but for the purpose of hearing. I suggest delaying word study at this point--unless something jumps out and slaps us in the face. Right now we are trying to be impacted by the whole. Dissecting the parts will come later.

In short, at this moment in the process we need to find behavior which will keep us out of the driver's seat. Our present concern is to be accosted, confronted. Does this mean that all we can do is to wait around prayerfully and quietly for

the Word to drop by? I think not. There is something we can do which by its nature can help keep us out of the driver's seat and assist the possibility of our being confronted. We can look for trouble.

What is there about the text that does not seem to fit? Is there anything strange here? "Ideological suspicion" does not always feel comfortable for us--particularly when we are included in its object. But "suspicion" in its positive sense of probing uncertainty is precisely what can be helpful here. Trouble, in, around, with and about the text is often the occasion for a fresh hearing. In leading lectionary workshops, I often ask the participants to gather in small groups and look for what is weird in a passage. Anything is helpful at this point if it breaks us loose from the usual, the easily accepted, the routine and timid truth which will not change lives.

Sometimes the "trouble" will not show itself until we have read the previous two chapters of the text--and the following chapter as well. Our particular text, after all, did not come out of a vacuum. Its placement in the biblical sweep was the result of someone's conscious strategy.

We are looking for trouble, for textual issues. As we are confronted by them we begin--like any good detective--to research them. Now, word study, introductions to the book as found in

commentaries, comparisons with parallel or conflicting passages--all the resources of solid exegetical work--will be in order. Now we are on the kind of trail for disclosure which has life and vitality. But, note the difference between exploring a text to find its answer and exploring a text to pursue its problem. The first puts us in command. The second, while prompting similar exegetical work, positions us as investigator rather than as explainer. Instead of placing us in a nice tidy little circle with God and the text as over against the listeners, we become the first listener.

In all of this we are headed toward the first major moment in the sermon preparation process, which is to answer the question: What is the focus of the text?

The question of focus is born out of the need to know what is at stake here, what was the biblical issue or issues that needed to be addressed in the first place. Now, sometimes the biblical text does not appear to name a specific issue, but rather contains a fairly straight-forward declaration of some kind--which means the preacher needs to look before and after the specific text in order to find the focus--or perhaps, imaginatively to the anticipated reaction of the original receivers--or even next Sunday's congregation.

When the preacher's early preparation work on a sermon

concentrates on focus, or issue or trouble, the text can emerge in a kind of juxtaposed form. That is, the textual exploration includes both issue and resolution--generally one explicitly and the other implicitly. It is the preacher's holistic moment of insight which grasps both issue and resolution together (sometimes at an intuitive level of thought) which produces that euphoric epistemological experience to begin with. Perceived connection between issue and resolution is the key to that uncertain certainty. The connection prompts the excitement--and alerts the preacher that something is happening--even if not yet quite nameable.

On the other hand, when the biblical question is put in language of resolution form: "What is the message of the text?" it is likely that no excitement of juxtaposition will occur. When the biblical question is put in focus language: "What is the issue here?" chances increase that an explicit question may get linked with an implicit answer or an explicit answer may get linked with an implicit question. And one increases greatly the chance of being able to say: "I think I've got something." Otherwise put, how one asks biblical questions is instrumental in determining whether the preacher or the text is doing the driving.

No doubt you have already noticed that I did not suggest the formulation of a theme sentence--which is the more usual

advice. Why not?

The reasons are multiple--and involve further preparation traps which need to be avoided. First, however, we need to note the important goal that the theme sentence attempts to accomplish. I see its primary goal as providing precision of homiletical purpose. Indeed, through the years I have heard altogether too many sermons (some of them mine) which have wandered all over God's creation looking for a place to land. Sometimes the preacher's desperation (and the listeners as well) can be solved only by a lengthy closing summary prayer.

Homiletical precision is, of course, required. The question is how to achieve it. Although often recommended as the answer, theme sentences also provide potential problems.

First, a theme sentence tends to propositionalize the sermon. The sermonic goal often becomes narrowed to an educational aim--to inform, to clarify, to apply, to amplify. And then we measure our success in terms of having "gotten it across,"--a very telling phrase. It is often true that in the preparation process, the sooner we settle on a theme, the quicker and more likely the sermon can settle on becoming a report.

Second, except in unusual hands theme sentences often have the effect of turning off the mind. The reason is simply that it

names next Sunday's event in terms of resolution. Lost is the torque of juxtaposition. My experience is that most students who operate with the use of a theme sentence operate deductively as soon as the theme sentence is named. The probing sense of inquiry is lessened, the focus narrowed to thoughtful and careful articulation of the "message." Now, obviously, this does not always happen. There are those who can utilize the technique with fine effect--but generally they are those whose thinking is wonderfully weird, who are able to see resolution and yet still keep the doors of the mind open. For many, the comfort of resolution is too good to set aside for further engagement of an issue.

Those who suggest a thematic statement in the sermon preparation process often place it exactly between biblical work and sermon formation. The unintended result is to divide the work, with the whole process unwittingly imagined as an hourglass on its side--with biblical work narrowing toward the thematic sentence, which then opens into sermon formation. I believe this to be an unnecessary--even counterproductive--division of labor. The context of sermon formation is often the propitious time for exegetical labor, just as the shape of a biblical text itself can be instructive toward the eventual form of the sermon.

How often it has been true for me that if I had to write a

traverse the gap in between. In other words, I am ready to discover the fundamental turn of the sermon. Otherwise put: How can the Gospel effect the transformation of issue to resolution.

Sometimes, the preparation process does not move from focus to aim to turn--sometimes it moves from focus to turn to aim (which more nearly resembles the completed sermon). That is, once the issue is named, biblical and other theological work may reveal "from out of the blue" what in fact the sermon really ought to accomplish. In whatever order the second and third major moments in sermon preparation occur, focus almost always comes first.

So it is that the major difference between my advice and others' in imagining preliminary sermon preparation work is clear. I attempt to achieve the important goal of precision by how I ask the sermonic question rather than by how I state the sermonic answer.

We began our consideration of sermon preparation by means of an image of the "homiletical rabbit"--asking, just how we can intentionally and inadvertently allow the rabbit to catch us. Changing the metaphor, the question became one of how to stay out of the driver's seat while planning our sermon preparation process. The issue has to do with authority and control. (dvising anyone to "stay open" may seem like the advice to "be

spontaneous now." Although it is difficult for a person to decide to stay open in preparation work, there are behaviors which by their nature lean us toward openness and others that will lead us toward control. My proposal is to move toward a focus statement rather than a theme sentence in order to maximize the chances of remaining open to hear the text.

To be sure, survival in sermon preparation is difficult for all. The bottom line finally is not the question of whether we survived. The big question is: Did the rabbit survive?

theme statement, I would be unable to name it until almost the end of the preparation process. Moreover, once a theme sentence is produced, the preacher tends to move into the driver's seat and take charge. In short, we need to maximize our capacity to keep open throughout the preparation process. The theme sentence seems not to encourage that openness for most preachers I have had occasion to observe at close range.

Given the need for precision of purpose, and given the problems argued here, I propose the focus sentence rather than the theme sentence. I have found it quite remarkable how once the issue is named with some precision, the further major questions of the sermon-to-be fall into place. Once the issue is named crisply, the sermon aim gains focus.

My choice in asking for the naming of a sermonic "aim" is quite deliberate. To perceive the matter as looking for a sermonic message, for example, is too restrictive. What I need to know is: What do I hope will happen as a result of this sermon--not what is its theme, or message, or point. And with clarity about focus or issue, the aim becomes more easily nameable.

Likewise, when at one end of the anticipated sermonic process I can state the issue, and at the other the sermonic aim, I am in a better position to figure out what is needed to

Textual Cadences for a Proclaimed World

I

The contemporary church is facing a crisis of language and identity. This language and identity crisis is not centered exclusively in questions of appropriate pronouns for God or new words for hymns, although those language questions are indeed at issue in significant and painful ways. The crisis runs beyond those particulars to every constituent part of the church's being and doing. We are in danger of forgetting how to speak the words that make us who we are. We are becomingly increasingly unskilled in the language that marks us as children of the gospel.¹ The vocal presence of verbal Christians on all sides of all issues and causes may seem to give the lie to this suggestion of a language crisis, but if we listen behind and beneath the cacophany of the church, we may detect an echoing, aching silence. For despite the noise, the church is at a loss for words, because we are losing our words.

Two contributing factors to this crisis can be briefly noted. First, the church has been party to the Enlightenment yearning for reasoned and disinterested language and linguistic frameworks with which to describe the world.² The church has joined in an effort to describe the world in the reasoned and reasonable categories of the social sciences, not in the affrontive and embarrassing categories of the gospel and the language and images of our tradition. Second, the rapid increase in technology and mass communication, including the technology of communication, has contributed to an environment

where words no longer mean what they seem to say. In this season of presidential politics, it is hardly necessary to provide examples of contemporary doublespeak.

Wendell Berry, in an essay entitled, "Standing by Words," offers a compelling critique of technological language.³ He points to the danger of excessive generalizations in which there is no space for the particularity and precision of human life.⁴ He pushes through the controlled veneer of such language to note that, "All the grand and perfect dreams of the technologists are happening in the future, but nobody is there." Communication technologists produce "words that cannot be stood by."⁵

The church has been party to this pathology of language also. We will all readily point a finger at church bureaucrats, but that distancing of the problem simplifies its impact. The logic of too much local church governance and the linguistic underpinnings of too many sermons are impervious to the importance of standing by words.

As an alternative to the "linguistic no-man's land" (sic) of disembodied, technological language, Berry envisions a world where

People and other creatures would be known by their names and histories, not by their numbers and percentages. History would be handed down in songs and stories, not reduced to evolutionary or technological trends.⁶

Berry's words speak to the church with a gentle irony, because what he presents as a saving alternative is the very essence of the church. We are a people who come to know ourselves through

ory and song, who can ultimately only know ourselves that way. Too often, however, we have been seduced away from that essential core.

George Lindbeck, in The Nature of Doctrine, has provided theological warrants for the type of linguistic enterprise that Berry envisions. Lindbeck's work directly addresses the church's crisis of language and identity. He maintains that the challenge for the church is to learn (relearn) the language of our faith. "Just as an individual becomes human by learning a language, so he or she becomes a new creature through learning and interiorizing the language that speaks of Christ."⁷ Instead of continuing to interpret the gospel story through the language and categories of the world, the church must now interpret the world through the language and categories of the gospel. We must become competent speakers of our own language again.⁸

The challenge to the church to know and speak its own language rests acutely on the preacher, whose work depends on language. The preacher has nothing but words for proclamation, and so which words and whose words are spoken is critical. Is the preacher's primary language the language of the gospel? As preachers we readily turn to scripture for the subject of our sermons, but we also need to turn to scripture for the decisive, shaping language of our sermons. That does not mean simply that the words of scripture should pepper our sermons, but that we embrace the entire language world of scripture. That is, faithful sermons are molded by the language of our faith and tradition, so that reality is redescribed for us by scripture.

To preach the gospel, we must know and be shaped by the primary language of our faith.

I want to illustrate the interface between the primary language of our faith and the proclamation of the church by focusing on one example from scripture. The example I have chosen is the salvation oracle, a form we recognize by its hope-filled words, "Fear not." The salvation oracle has its beginnings in Israel's core liturgy. It moved most powerfully into the community's proclamation in the exilic preaching of II Isaiah. The proclamation of the early church in turn was shaped by this language learned from Israel's liturgy. The language of those who boldly proclaim "fear not" can reteach us our words and provide a generative paradigm for the theological and pastoral work of our preaching.

II

The presence of the salvation oracle in Israel's liturgy testifies to the power of God's spoken word to offer hope in the face of fear. Israel's experience of its God as one who attends to the people's cries (e.g., Exod 3:7-8) had a decisive influence on the development and shape of Israel's liturgy.⁹ Our primary access to that liturgy is through the Psalms. It usually comes as a surprise to us moderns (especially if we judge by the psalms in our hymnals) that a large number of the prayers and songs in the psalter are laments -- individual and communal prayers of desperate longing, heart wrenching brokenness, pained

injustice. The laments confront God with startling candor, placing full-bodied pleas and petitions for help and deliverance before God. These candid psalms of complaint and desperation have a regular home in Israel's liturgy. Israel knew that its worship had to allow for the honest articulation of pain and fear. Pain and fear must be handed over to God in disciplined, liberated speech if they are ever to be transformed.

What is most astonishing about the lament psalms is that the liturgy worked: the transformation of pain and fear did indeed take place. Psalms that begin as plea end as praise.¹⁰ The lament psalms not only contain words of lament, petition, and complaint, but also words that reflect change, transformation, and hope. Reality does indeed seem to change for the petitioner from the beginning of the psalm to the end.

Psalm 13, for example, opens with a bitter, pained cry:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul;

and have sorrow in my heart all day?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God;

Lighten my eyes lest they sleep the sleep of death. . .

(Ps 13:1-3)

The psalmist knows himself to be in constant pain and sorrow, threatened by enemies, absented from God's presence, standing on the verge of death. Yet, somehow, Psalm 13 does not end with such despairing, grief-filled words. Much to our surprise, the

mood of this Psalm changes to full-bodied praise:

But I have trusted in your steadfast love;
 my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
 I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt
 bountifully with me.

(Ps 13:5-6)

The psalmist moves from complaint about a God who has abandoned him to praise of a God who has dealt bountifully with him. The psalmist does not praise a God who will deal bountifully with him, but a God who already has dealt bountifully with him. God's bountiful, gracious acts are as real to the psalmist in v.6 as God's silence and seeming abandonment were in vv.1-3. What makes such a turnabout possible?

The most widely accepted explanation for this turnabout is that within the context of the liturgy, the answer to the petitioner's plea has been given.¹¹ At the moment in the liturgy when the complaint and plea have been placed before God, the priest, the leader of the liturgy, addresses the petitioner with a "salvation oracle." This "salvation oracle," as it is called, assures the petitioner that his or her plea has been heard by God and that God's presence and help are sure. The leader of the liturgy speaks the words "Fear not," words that communicate the reassuring power of God's promise for life and deliverance.

The dynamic movement in Israel's liturgy from the desperate plea of the petitioner to the world-transforming answer of God is succinctly captured in a text from Lamentations:

I call on thy name, O Lord,
 from the depths of the pit;
 Thou didst hear my plea, "Do not close
 thine ear to my cry for help."
 Thou didst come near when I called on thee;
 thou didst say, "Do not fear."

(Lam 3:55-57)

Into the midst of the pain and fear of the petitioner, a word of God enters to banish fear and to open the petitioner to new, courageous possibilities of life. The salvation oracle as such is not enough to explain the change from plea to praise in the lament psalms. That is, there is nothing magical about the speech form per se, but it is "the word which in these oracles came from God to the one petitioning and lamenting" that makes the change possible.¹² We all live in fear, waiting to be addressed in our need, and as Brueggemann has observed, "when we are decisively addressed by one with power and credibility, it does indeed change our world."¹³

Three elements come together to create the cadences and language world of the salvation oracle in Israel's liturgy.

- 1) Israel's core liturgy depends on the central dynamic of speaking and being answered. The language of the liturgy asserts that Israel can entrust its life to God in pained and demanding speech and God will respond. Israel is not abandoned in its pain but is met by God's hope-filled presence.
- 2) The response to Israel's spoken pain is also speech.

Israel's speech is met with a decisive spoken word of God that transforms despair to hope and makes new life possible. The liturgy enacts the transforming power of God's word.

- 3) Integral to these two affirmations about address and response is Israel's unshakable refusal to take the world in fear. The very fact of this liturgy in Israel's life bespeaks Israel's refusal to accept fear as the governing word in the world. Israel's liturgy insists that there is always another word more powerful than the language of fear.

Israel's liturgy was a moment when the life-changing, grace-filled, fear-banishing word of God could be spoken and embraced.

III

The language of Israel's liturgy was not static. It did not remain frozen in the Book of Worship, locked inside the priest's study, but moved with the people of Israel into fresh situations of pain and need. The exile of 587 B.C.E. was one such situation of need. Through the preaching of II Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55), the language of the liturgy was again given a chance to have its say.

The wonder of II Isaiah's preaching to the exiles is that he found a way in the midst of grief, despair, and fear to preach a word of hope. There was no arguing about the data: Israel was indeed in exile and its life was irrevocably changed. The land, the people, the institutions were all lost. Lost, too, was the courage to hope in God's promised future. II Isaiah, however,

read the data differently from his fellow sufferers. He held firmly to the language of the liturgy that knows God as one who hears and delivers. He did not discount the pain and suffering of exiled Israel, but he knew that another way was possible for Israel because another way had been promised. The challenge for this poet and preacher was to enable other exiles to share in his vision, to reteach the language and cadences of hope.

II Isaiah used the salvation oracle to reteach his fellow exiles their own language. II Isaiah's theological genius and pastoral creativity were to appropriate the words "Do not fear" from the liturgy of the temple and make them the stuff of proclamation. In the liturgy, the words of the oracle were not simply an urging for the petitioner to be fearless, a reminder that the petitioner should merely get tough and show what he or she is made of. Rather, in the moment that the salvation oracle is spoken, with the articulation of God's word of "fear not," fear is removed.¹⁴ A real change is wrought by virtue of God's assuring word, evoking God's assuring presence. It is the moment of speaking that permits the petitioner to engage in a life of new possibilities.

II Isaiah remembered this language and believed that the salvation oracle was an authentic mode of God's dealing with God's people. He believed that the spoken word of God's assurance could indeed banish fear and open up the present to the inbreaking of the future. In the proclamation of II Isaiah, the cultic moment of decisive speaking is transformed into the preaching moment of decisive speaking.

II Isaiah has a "text," then, the fear-banishing words from Israel's liturgy, and with that text he preaches the good news. We shall look briefly at one use of the salvation oracle in II Isaiah's preaching, Isa 41:8-13 (cf. 41:14-16; 43:1-4; 5-7, and 44:1-5).

Isa 41:8-13 opens with words of direct address (vv.8-9). Fearful, heartbroken Israel stands before God, and God's words of address acknowledge Israel's presence. Israel understands itself in terms of judgment, exile, and despair, but God knows different names for Israel: my servant, my chosen one, the offspring of Abraham, my friend. Even if Israel has forgotten its name, God remembers who Israel really is and insists on that identity.

After the opening address, II Isaiah's preaching revolves around the words "fear not." These words are spoken twice, at the beginning and end of the unit (vv.10,13), and are the words around which the community is to rally and out of which they are to act. The words "fear not" simultaneously recognize the reality of the community's situation and deny that situation ultimate power. On the one hand, behind the words "fear not" we can hear echoes of the community's fears of being abandoned by God, of being victims of enemy captors, of being powerless. The words "fear not" are without force and meaning if they do not arise out of and meet a situation of specific, concrete fear. On the other hand, we are also to hear God's inbreaking, transforming presence in these words. They announce that God's unfailing promises defeat our fears.