

# Foreword

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THIS REMARKABLE COLLECTION OF essays on preaching by an international group of scholars and pastors shares more than a common subject matter. Running like a river through these chapters is the vision of preaching as a faithful *craft*; that is, as a skilled and complex practice possessing standards of excellence, embedded in a rich tradition, and performed out of deep theological conviction.

In a self-absorbed, self-referential culture, it is sometimes easy to lose sight of the idea of preaching as a disciplined craft that can be studied, learned, practiced, and, to some extent at least, mastered. Twenty-five years ago, a team of North American professors of preaching, in the thrall of various upbeat, student-centered approaches to education then in vogue, chirped optimistically, “Each of us has within us the effective preacher God wants us to become. We teachers of preaching know that when we guide wisely in the process of learning preaching, we help students cultivate and harvest what God has planted in them. . . . We aim to help each person in class start on the road to becoming with God’s help the best preacher each has it in them to be.”<sup>1</sup>

However much this statement gained in pedagogical compassion it quickly lost in utter naiveté. It is one thing to recognize that people do bring instincts and inner gifts to the ministry of preaching, but the notion that students waltz into preaching class with a tiny “effective preacher” somehow tucked away inside them, like a caterpillar in a cocoon, waiting to emerge and take wing manages to reinforce some of our culture’s (and the pulpit’s) worst tendencies toward narcissism. As W. H. Auden once

1. Wardlaw, ed. *Learning Preaching*, 1.

reportedly said, “Poetry is not self-expression. If art is self-expression, keep it to yourself.”

The main problem, however, in believing that students are homiletical buds waiting to come to full flower is that it overlooks just how much about good preaching lies outside of one’s natural impulses. Christian preaching is not the result of naturally gifted orators who somehow stumbled on a really good message. It is rather the reverberation in frail human speech of Easter’s thunderclap. It is not finding voice for that which wells up from within. It is instead rooted in the astonished cry uttered in the discovery of what God has done in the world.

The church has, through fire and trial, learned slowly over the centuries many lessons of the Spirit about how to preach faithfully, how human words can be obediently shaped as vessels of proclamation. Preaching is not a science, but it is surrounded by a deep vein of accumulated wisdom, which constitutes a homiletical tradition that can be passed on and learned. To say, “Each of us has within us the effective preacher God wants us to become” ignores this tradition and is like saying each of us has within us the effective thoracic surgeon, nuclear engineer, symphony conductor, or Boeing 777 pilot God wants us to become. Yes, preaching depends upon an inner call and a set of personal gifts, but there is also a body of knowledge to be acquired as well as a lore about good practice given to the company of preachers over the centuries.

The authors of this volume, who stand firmly in this stream of wisdom, underscore that good sermons spring from acts of biblical interpretation. At the risk of sounding flip, nothing invigorates preaching more than having something to say. In the Christian homiletical tradition, having something meaningful to say is a product of an encounter with Scripture. These preachers who have produced this book are convinced that good preaching results from faithful exegesis, which involves critical inquiry, textual analysis, and genre exploration, but which can by no means be confined to mere method. Procedural and rule-bound exegesis can so often be an autopsy on a now-deceased text, and some preachers, as Karen Case-Green reminds us in these pages, “dissect the text, forgetting Balthasar’s warning that ‘Anatomy can be practiced only on a dead body.’” By contrast, faithful preaching requires waiting and prayerful expectation for the living Word to be born anew in these ancient texts. The God who became flesh in the incarnation continues to advent in Scripture, becoming living Word again and again.

The authors also recognize that each generation of preachers brings a new context to the homiletical and exegetical task, which creates a living and growing preaching tradition. This allows them to glean insights about preaching not only from biblical exemplars but also from the luminous figures from church history, such as Jonathan Edwards, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Charles Haddon Spurgeon, and from contemporary preachers and theologians, such as Jana Childers, Richard Lischer, and Walter Brueggemann. The company of preachers and the gathered wisdom about the ministry of preaching spans the whole history of the faith.

But what bubbles up most from these pages is a great passion for the ministry of preaching itself. Emma Ineson notes that, in Matthew's account of the first Easter, the women left the tomb "with fear and great joy." She adds, "That is a good description of what it's like to preach. There is the sense of great joy that I have a message to deliver, coupled with that ever-present fear that I may not do justice to what God has given me, fear of how the message (or I) may be received, fear that I may have gotten it wrong."

The theologian Karl Barth once observed that the only fitting attitude for a preacher to have in the pulpit is embarrassment—embarrassment because we do not have what we are there to give: the Word of God. We stand there, then, as beggars, utterly dependent upon God to supply both the gospel and the strength needed to proclaim it. But, even in our embarrassment, we stand there also joyful that we are the ones given the great privilege of trumpeting the good news.

The authors of this book are persuaded that God's grace is made perfect in our weakness, and they are, therefore, emboldened to take up ever anew the task of proclamation. The blend of courage and humility that permeates the chapters of this book reminds me of an essay written years ago by James A. Wharton, a fine pastor, a creative Old Testament scholar, and an innovative teacher of preaching. In the essay, Wharton remembered his junior high French teacher. The students called her "Fifi," not out of affection but out of mockery over her large and awkward body, for her clumsy social manner, and mainly for the way she would purse her lips and pronounce French phrases with an exaggerated accent. "We snickered behind our hands," he wrote, "and traded malicious glances, and dismissed Fifi as an inherently ridiculous person."<sup>2</sup>

2. Wharton, "Protagonist Corner," 28.

One fall, Fifi related to her students that she had taken a wonderful summer trip to France and that she had seen the most beautiful sight in the world, the famous Mont Blanc, which, of course, she pronounced “Moan Blawnnnnnk.” Wharton writes, “For the better part of a term it was ‘Moan Blawnnnnnk’ this and ‘Moan Blawnnnnnk’ that until we all went into a frenzy of heartless hilarity every time Fifi honked the name.” Every time she mentioned the place, the class would break up, but Fifi would just stand there undeterred, seemingly confident that, if the class could have been there, could have stood where she stood and seen what she saw, every student would have been equally overwhelmed by the sight of “Moan Blawnnnnnk.”

Late in the term, Fifi proudly announced to the class that she had brought color slides of her trip to show the class. Now the students could see for themselves the magnificence of “Moan Blawnnnnnk.” But things did not go as Fifi had planned. When she projected the blurry image from the Kodak slide onto the screen, “the imps of hell could not have matched the screech of laughter that greeted Fifi’s ears from her hysterical students.” The screen was filled with an image of Fifi herself, in profile and in all her awkwardness. In the left upper corner of the screen, was Mont Blanc, “a tiny, snowy triangle perched saucily on Fifi’s voluminous bosom.” The students howled with scornful glee.

Writing now as a grown man and remembering that eruption of derisive and callow laughter, Wharton says, “It is only recently that I have gained the maturity to wonder how Fifi managed to cry herself to sleep that night.” And then Wharton asks Fifi for forgiveness—forgiveness because he is now an adult and a preacher, and he knows how it feels to have seen something so beautiful that he wants everyone else to see it, too, only to find his ridiculous self getting in the way:

It is now my turn to try to express to other people what I take to be a transcendent wonder. In my heart of hearts, when the clarity of faith is on me, I cannot imagine any wonder remotely comparable to the victory of God’s self-giving love for the world in Jesus Christ our Lord. . . . Yet every time I stand to proclaim the wonder, I am painfully aware that it is my comic figure, and my ridiculous words, that confront people in the foreground. I have to hope that people can somehow concentrate on the snowy triangle of the gospel, perched somewhere indecorously on my person, and perceive the wonder in spite of me. . . . God grant that my next slide-show will let the mountain fill the screen.<sup>3</sup>

3. *Ibid.*, 29.

The authors of this volume are aware of their limitations and the fragility of any human being trying to preach the gospel. But they keep clear focus, and they keep underlining in manifold ways the call to “preach not ourselves but Christ Jesus.” Because of what is written in these pages, those of us who preach have a prayer that, in our next sermonic slide show, the mountain of the gospel will fill the screen.

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