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# Preaching: The Big Imagination

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In the mid summer sun an eight-year-old girl sits cross-legged on the soft grass of her back yard. A brown plastic shake roof covers the dollhouse that stands before her. Outdoor sounds of lawn mower, grass blower, and barking dogs fade away as she enters into an imaginary world. The outside of her metal dollhouse has front windows with curved-end awnings and green and white stripes. Inside, two floors open to her with rooms of hanging drapes, Venetian blinds, and floral wall decorations. A mahogany colored staircase connects the floors. She needs nothing more than a little plastic table with matching chairs to entertain. It is teatime, and all her imaginary friends are seated where characters and plot enhance an all-consuming world. And when her cat curls next to the dolls' house for his afternoon nap, she immediately lifts the calico into the drama of her imagination.

As the child grows up, this world closes. Now, much older, she falls asleep with a different vision. Every night she dribbles the basketball past half court as the game's last seconds tick away. Her squad trails the favored opponent by two. Double-teamed, she fakes right, looks left, than darts between the defenders. Now, with just seconds on the clock, well beyond the three-point arc she pulls up, leaps, and at the peak of her jump she gracefully launches her shot just over a defender's hand. The ball spins through the hoop, Whoooosh. Parents on the court, teammates swarm her, all in slow motion. Amidst these softening images, she drifts off to sleep. This young woman has always been able to move into these comforting scenes, which sustain her and provide her hope.

But when it comes to adults, not everyone approves of such an active imagination. We are cautionary because imagination is not inevitably benign and can be dangerous.[1] Male students, professors, and visiting speakers confess before chapels in Christian colleges to addictions to sour imaginations that have created abuse and destruction. Perhaps this is the reason why some push an extreme and wish to crush all imagination. "Suppress it," they claim, "it isn't real." They say, "Deal with the tangibles. Reality is what you can grasp with your hands, taste with your tongue, hear with your ears and … count."[2] Sometimes we are embarrassed that we ever lived in an imaginative world of wonder and challenge.

But, to extinguish the human imagination is an ill-conceived notion. Consider, for instance, one philosopher's indictment of the politicians behind World War I. "All this madness, all this rage, all this flaming death has been brought about because a set of officials *without imagination* or heart, have chosen that it should occur."[3] Four years of brutal trench fighting, millions killed and wounded in the bloodiest war to that point in history: all because men *without imagination* or heart chose it.

Imagination is so real that some contend imagination *creates* reality. All who compete for our imagination—through television, movies, billboards, radio, Internet, computer games, and the other mediums that beckon and assault us here in the United States of Advertising—validate the claim that imagination creates reality.

"Imagine yourself with this hair color and style … wearing an adorable Anne Klein watch against a two-tone diamond pendant … sporting these slacks, this blouse … thinner, healthier, sexier … driving this car." Reality is created, and that is the reason why few under the age of 40 have ever imagined themselves in a PT Cruiser.

Image with me: lime green 2003 VW Bug pulls into your local Sunoco. The door opens. Who steps out? Why, she is a serious 52-year-old who sports short gray hair and leaves a daisy in the dash. Businesspeople see themselves in red Infiniti FXs. You know the make, model, and color tone of the vehicle that defines you. Imagination creates reality. Eight-year-old girls grow up to be mothers and hoop dreams will be lived on WNBA courts because imagination creates reality.

## THE BIBLE AND A PRE-EXISTING WORLDVIEW

What does the Bible say about this? The answer to this fine question is that the word *imagination* seldom appears in scripture[4] although someone like Paul will occasionally say, "Be careful what you watch" or "Watch what you think." Proverbs is chock full of such advice. But, all in all, the Bible does not cast itself as the inspector general who examines our hearts to determine who passes muster. Scripture has a higher and nobler task. The Bible desires to shape our imagination because it knows that through our imagination it can shape our lives. Scripture provides Christians opportunity to imagine the "real world" where God invites us to live an existence shaped by the gospel.

God knows, however, that our daily dreams are saturated with another, larger, and American dream. God knows that we are tempted to worship at culture's altar. These are the very reasons why God longs to reform our identity through scripture; why the church is meant to nurture Christian imagination; why preaching can help construct the community's storehouse of imagination.

Such claims may appear altogether threatening for those of us reluctant to allow anyone or anything to tamper with the way that we see ourselves and the world, and this is why when we open the Bible we are first drawn to the places that enhance our *existing* worldview. We highlight passages that feed our *perceived* hunger and add high digital quality to the image *currently* cast on our mind's screen. For this reason, I am never surprised when college freshmen are immediately taken by the possibilities they find in the Song of Solomon. The descriptive and erotic phrase, "You are the work of an artist," raises eyebrows and evokes the response, "I think I'll memorize that verse; I could use that line."

Nor am I surprised when wealthy, middle-class American parents have no ears to hear the clear trumpet call of the eighth-century prophets; they are tone deaf to the cry for social justice. Yet, by the time their children enroll in college, they have already somehow learned to resonate deeply with the promised blessings to Abraham. Perhaps there is reason here why The Prayer of Jabez was such a hot commodity: Jabez was supplemental reading to a pre-existing imagination. "Bless me and enlarge my borders."[5]

Let us think some about the commanding power of this pre-existing imagination. While *The Prayer of Jabez* is only an instance, it may clarify our understanding. *Jabez* feeds a pre-existing imagination for several reasons. Consider Jackson Carroll's disclosure of the reading done by clergy. In a survey conducted in spring 2001 and published the next summer, Carroll asked ministers, "What book have you most recently read." The *Prayer of Jabez* was the first or second book most often listed by conservative and mainline Protestant ministers. Carroll concludes, "Although [preachers] may read regularly, what they read seems to be relatively light fare and pragmatically focused … [They are] able to read but unable to distinguish what is worth reading."[6] Carroll's findings, I suspect, are partly the result of the constant strain and overwhelming rigors of ethical dilemmas, Wednesday's class, tonight's meeting, committee demands, the elder's hip replacement surgery, not to mention the ever-pressing sermons. Is it any wonder that the reading is theologically light and pragmatically heavy?[7]

Beyond the minister's overwhelming schedule, how does one explain the stunning popularity of *The Prayer of Jabez*? What pre-existing imagination does *Jabez* feed? The answer is partly revealed in the author's promise, "I want to teach you how to pray a daring prayer that God always answers. It is brief—only one sentence with four parts—and tucked away in the Bible, but I believe it contains the key to a life of extraordinary favor from God."[8] There is much here that entices the readers. "God always answers with extraordinary favor" is an especially winsome phrase. And, the prospect of a treasure hunt for a key verse hidden somewhere in the pages of the Bible captivates our adventurous spirits.

Preparing to teach a course in American public address when first reading *The Prayer of Jabez*, I was forcibly struck by similarities between *Jabez* and a particular staple in American discourse: Russell Conwell's *Acres of Diamonds*. Delivered on more than 6,000 occasions a century ago, Conwell's oration is a classic example of the gospel of prosperity.[9] The speech remains a student favorite because it contains a bevy of anecdotes starring people who seize opportunities and make their fortune and fame. In Conwell's narrative, wealth and success are sanctioned by God, possibilities are limitless, and fortune is sometimes buried in one's own back yard. Even among today's hearers, *Acres of Diamonds* sets folk dreaming and imagining what riches and expanded boarders await them. There are several similarities between these two bestsellers, *The Prayer of Jabez* and *Acres of Diamonds*. The clearest and most important is this: *Jabez* and *Diamonds* satisfy a long-cultivated imagination that threatens a Christian biblical vision.[10]

Churches of Christ living in 21st-century America have been heavily influenced by values espoused within the spatial borders of this country. Spiritual mentors from a variety of Christian traditions have salved our concerns. But, not all of our *perceived needs* are found in the world Scripture imagines. As the web does not spin the spider, so humanity does not set out the vision of God. *We know this*, and in the deepest parts of our being we desperately long for a vision beyond ourselves. While *Jabez* and his kin offer popular solutions to common problems, we still yearn for an imagination shaped by the One who created us and is able to sustain us. Where shall do we turn for this longed-for vision inspired by God?

We do well to *begin* with the Bible. Not as a secondary source, because scripture isn't meant to be supplemental reading to an existing worldview. The Bible desires to create a worldview, to birth a reality through imagining a world into which it invites us to enter. As richly set as the last movie we viewed and descriptively vivid as the best novel we've read, the Bible makes one claim which positions it above all rivals for our imagination: the Bible is from God.

The Bible casts God's desires for reality into the hearts of those who believe its story enough to live in it. "All Scripture is inspired by God." As Garrett Green claims, "The religious vision of 'what the world is like,' embodied in the Scriptures … is for Christians the paradigmatic norm for human life and thought. Christian faith can be characterized accordingly as faithful imagination—living in conformity to the vision rendered by the Word of God in the Bible."[11]

## A Test

Ironically, now at the very hour we most need scripture to design a faithful imagination, we have developed an aversion to serious reflection on biblical stories and images. Consider, for example, the following description of preaching. Pay attention to *how* you hear these words.

> The preacher studies the Bible, not the world. He lives in the world; he cannot miss it. He is careful of what he reads, for that is what he will preach. He is careful of what he learns, because that is what he will know. Only after the preacher lets the Bible shape him can he perhaps shape the congregation. The Bible must enter the body, too. The preacher does not fit the Bible to the world. He most certainly does not fit the world to himself. He fits himself to the Bible.

Do you find this description of preaching harsh, radical, or excessive? Is this description over the top? One phrase certainly appears restrictive, "The preacher does not fit the Bible to the world." You might inquire, "What? That phrase precludes cultural sensitivity?"

This description of preaching might cause you to envision an exclusive and nearly forgotten era. You could detect a southern twang in the threadbare warning, "He is careful of what he reads, for that is what he will preach." When you hear "He is careful of what he learns, because that is what he will know," you might think of bookshelves restricted to black-covered commentaries published by *Gospel Advocate* and brown-spined books with the title *Old Paths*? The quote likely puts you in a place you've long ago left, a small building with peeling paint, dark panel interior, and the odor of an abandoned worldview.

Actually, I misquoted the source. The author, Annie Dillard, is not speaking to preachers but to *artists*. She actually proposed:

> The writer studies the literature, not the world. He lives in the world; he cannot miss it. … He is careful of what he reads, for that is what he will write. He is careful of what he learns, because that is what he will know. … Only after the writer lets literature shape her can she perhaps shape literature. … The art must enter the body, too. … The painter … does not fit the paints to the world. He most certainly does not fit the world to himself. He fits himself to the paint.[12]

Dillard isn't talking about the Bible after all. We might respond, "Well, that's a relief," pleased that the preacher is off the hook. But a question lingers, "Why does Dillard's description of the *artist* seem quite normal?" When we reply, "This is how dedicated artists must be," our rationalization raises subsequent questions such as, "Why does the *same* standard applied to the painter or writer appear 'over the top' for the preacher?" and, "How can we sanction the radical commitment of the artist but reject the same dedication in the preacher?" and "How is it that we have come to this reaction?"

What makes our mixed response so ironic is that preaching's seriousness—precisely the gravity reflected in *mis*reading Dillard—is key to shattering our settled realities and steering us past temporary fixes. Preaching's goal is not to create from within the congregation and interested seekers *better* fathers, mothers, employees and citizens. Preaching's goal is not to improve the Christian's current existence in Egypt. Preaching's goal is to facilitate the radical shift to being Christian. We came to preaching because we sensed its import and the meanings it created; we came to preaching believing that somehow a total immersion in the biblical text could evoke new possibilities of an alternative world, one envisioned in scripture.

## PARADIGMATIC PREACHING

How will such preaching happen? Where do we begin? I propose that we think larger, look longer and retrain our imagination. I suggest that our preaching re-present what is spatially absent and make present through images what is temporally inaccessible to our direct experience. Retraining the Christian imagination is a not deceitful, illusory, hidden, small, or self-promoting project. This is not a nostalgic longing for an innocent past, a lost childhood, and vanished times. Rather, it is the bursting open of the worlds imagined in scripture and the illumination provided by the light of its truth: the experience of the world of our yearnings.

What if we began by casting our creative minds upon the larger and paradigmatic sections of scripture? Alasdair Macintyre argues that the language of morality is in a state of grave disorder because we only possess "the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived."[13] His oft-quoted claim that humans are "essentially story-telling animals" set in its larger context is now essential to hear: "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question, 'Of what stories do I find myself a part?'"[14]

The Christian's question naturally follows: "What stories shape us?" The very meaning of our lives is molded by our narratives. Thus, even as we fall asleep at night we are still busy assessing stories from our

day, ruminating over a column in the paper, a conversation at the office, political advertisements, and the commiserating phone conversation. We are always busy narrating the stories of our days.[15] The Christian's critical question is, "*What* stories shape us?"

To move beyond Macintyre's "fragments of a conceptual scheme" I propose we practice "paradigmatic preaching," by which I mean two things. First, I call for a shift in our understanding of the world. Astute homileticians have recently called for the recovery of the church's language one word at a time and one image at a time.[16] Such a strategy is a helpful and essential means to recovery. The goal of preaching, I suggest, is to allow the worlds of the essential biblical narratives to create a dramatic shift between incommensurable worlds. The teachings of Jesus oppose the world of American capitalism. The worldview of the eighth-century prophets denies a gospel of wealth. Job's perspective of unreasonable suffering corrects a theology of unquenchable blessings.

Second, by paradigmatic preaching I mean to set out the pre-eminent texts in the Bible. Whether by sheer size or through the emphasis that Israel and the church gave the texts,[17] or by the claims made by the texts themselves, some portions of scripture surface as paradigmatic. Paul's evaluation "I delivered unto you as of *first* importance" signals that his subsequent comments on the death, burial, resurrection, and appearances of Jesus of Nazareth are of greater importance than other doctrines, passages, and events recorded in scripture.[18] Jesus' comment to the religious leaders of his time that love, mercy, and faithfulness are "weightier" than other laws, like tithing mint dill and cumin,[19] suggests some hierarchy of values, that some scripture has more substantive content than others.[20]

**We are always busy narrating the stories of our days. The Christian's critical question is, "What stories shape us?"**

What then of *Jabez*? Too late! *Jabez* faded and will not appear on Jackson Carroll's radar in the next clergy survey. For a few months, *Jabez* functioned for us in a way the lectionary functions for liturgical churches, you could hear the same (*Jabez*) passage in a number of congregations on any one Sunday. After hundreds of thousands read the book or heard sermon series inspired from the small volume, *Jabez* fell off the *New York Times* bestseller list. But, evangelical literature that feeds the highest percentage of our ministers has produced another volume that is likely to fill many preachers' sermon calendars.

Now on the *New York Times* bestseller list and in the hands of preachers and Sunday school teachers is Zondervan's *Purpose Driven Life*.[21] The book comes with an army of complementary materials, like *Daily Inspiration of the Purpose Driven Life* and the *Purpose Driven Life Deluxe Journal* and *Meditations on the Purpose Driven Life* and *Songs for a Purpose Driven Life* and the *Purpose Driven Life Scripture Keeper Plus with Cards* and *The Purpose Driven Life: 7 Steps for Discovering and Fulfilling Your Life Mission; Merchandising Kit*, not to mention the web site,[22] small-group resources, and calendars. All of these are available in countless versions, from the web, on DVD, audiocassette, paperback, large print and in foreign languages. Wholesale adoption by churches is the reason the book is a bestseller. Prepackaged programs, with generous price reductions for smaller churches, offer books and supplementary materials for members and sermon tapes for the minister.

And, I predict, well before the end of this decade, another and even more popular collection of spiritual source material will have surfaced and dominated our classes and pulpits before it, too, will disappear. Imagine now a career completed in ministry in which you have acquired a significant collection of books on matters related to Christian development. Look at your chronologically organized library, books placed on the shelf by the year of purchase. Trace the movement of your "works consulted" and you will see what you tapped into over the life of your career, everything from Chuck Swindoll to Leonard Sweet with several stops in between.

In this smorgasbord of Christian spirituality, you can tell by taste in author and publisher the kind of paradigm created for your congregation's spiritual consumption and, thus, the design of their imagination. The problem with such tasty selections is that they are not paradigmatic and will flee from our consciousness because they are small, hidden, and fail to engage us at an ultimate level, a "life-style rhetorical vision." A vision that will not so much express experience as produce it by embodying biblical paradigms, thus serving as models and exemplars for experience.[23]

Of course, such large thinking is not novel. Paradigmatic texts have defined and shaped Christian communities in the past. The African American church was sustained by the Exodus narrative, a paradigmatic text rehearsing stories of oppression at the hands of the Egyptian and American captors and God's eventual deliverance. African Americans found their self-image defined and hope revealed in the biblical narrative.[24]

There are countless examples among the growing collection of African American sermons. The most referenced is Martin Luther King Jr.'s crescendo from his "mountain top" speech, "I've been to the mountain top and I've seen into the promised land. I'll not get there with you. ..." Earlier, but not as frequently heard in the same speech, King addresses infighting amongst civil rights leaders. With another reference to the Exodus narrative, he says, "One way that Pharaoh keeps the captives in Egypt is to have them fight amongst themselves."[25] The audiotape reveals immediate and loud audience response to King's Exodus reference, delivered, not to a church but to the Memphis sanitation workers, a *secular* African American audience.[26] The import of the Exodus had filtered out even to a "secular audience."

Preaching can create an organizing pattern and exemplifying function that reconstitutes the biblical paradigm[27] when it engages an imagination of the world created in scripture, "re-presenting what is absent" and making "present through images what is inaccessible to direct experience."[28]

## One Paradigmatic Narrative

Come close then and inspect one man's life. We could visit him on Sunday where we would find him in church with his entire family. He is a leader in his church, a teacher, generous contributor, and a shepherd in the truest sense. Let's drop in on Friday instead because he has gathered everyone for a party. Listen to the friendly banter of the men, the young people laughing and the women talking. Look at his house, new model cars in the garages, the boat, jewelry he wears, the expansive property backdropped with mountains, all the signs of wealth. Now look at the man. Witness his physical strength. Notice his muscular forearms, hear the power in his voice, watch his brown eyes sparkle with life. Now he wraps one arm around his daughter and another around his son and draws them in for a hug. This man is held in high regard, robust, in his prime, a family man who is affluent, virtuous, and religious. He is a man who has been blessed, whose borders have expanded, and who enjoys all the bounties of God's gifts.

I am not describing Jabez! This is the opening scene from the book of Job, a glimpse at a life for which our "American imagination" hungers. Job is living the blessed existence. Family, wealth, and health are all described in terms of perfection. But, there is another realm in this vision cast by Job that cannot be heard or touched. In this place, which mysteriously intersects our world, conversations take place that we cannot hear, forces gather that we cannot see, and agreements are made that we will never know. Job reminds us that "Reality is *not* what you can grasp with your hands, taste with your tongue, hear with your ears and ... count."

And in this spiritual realm our adversary approaches and God mentions our name in the conversation with the Satan who knows our faults and weaknesses and can list every undeserved blessing we possess. This is the world imagined in Job. In the first two chapters, we readers learn that Job's suffering is not the extent of the universe. We know that there exists another realm, a place where God is in control of Job's experience. This world is larger than Job's sufferings.

The world imagined in Job cannot be described in one sermon. It cannot be captured in a bumper sticker, although Eliphaz tries. I am not suggesting that we preach through Job as a sermon series, although that might be helpful. I am not recommending that we simply brush up on old exegetical skills. We have long known that the rational mind does not nourish. Nor am I encouraging us to adopt the writer's literary techniques, although, our sermonic styles would be greatly enriched if our descriptions and dialogue could captivate and arrest in the manner of Job.[29] I ask something much more substantive and revolutionary. I ask that in our sermon preparation and delivery, we live in the world imagined in Job.

Job's story is relentlessly complex and proposes to tether us to something beyond advertisements, beyond what will be yesterday's headlines crawling at the bottom of our television screens, and beyond what we have discerned to be "our needs." So connected to this other world, we know that even the most innocent can throw a cloud of doubt over God's commendation ("do you still holds fast to your integrity?") and turn the adversary's prediction into a personal challenge ("curse God and die").

In Job's world, we learn how to think and act. God hands us a script with words for us to articulate. When Zophar claims, "She's on welfare because she's lazy" and Bildad explains, "The reason those families are poor is because they waste their money" we will know that while these so-called comforters judge with a common wisdom, they demonstrate insensitivity to a larger reality.

**Do not be afraid to open Job's paradigmatic texts. Do not be afraid to be a storyteller. Do not be afraid to be fresh. Do not be afraid to tether your congregation to the world imagined in Job.**

We may even hear the one being crushed, Job himself, curse, shake his fist at God and say, "I wish I were dead." We will be tempted to fall into old habits, quoting churchy moralisms: "You ought not say such a thing." Or deferring to King Psychology: "You need to 'see' someone." If we resist temptation, however, and live within the narrative, we may learn to say, "Let him talk."

Or, our worst nightmare awakes with us in the morning and becomes the reality of our life. We are Job. Crushed by the discovery that what we most cherish is gone. Our health, family, and love all vanished. In their place we live with pain and skepticism. People who once loved us play the role of the accuser. There seems to be a statue of limitations on our complaining, on our friends' sympathy. Our spirituality, once a celebrated trait, is suspect. We know all of this because Job's world and our lives have mysteriously intersected.

But, if we continue to believe that God is transcendent and we are finite and that God is creator and Job and we are limited creatures, then amidst the opening tragedies when we cannot see or hear what transpires in the "heavenly realm," we will trust that God has placed limits on our pain and that God is intimately aware of our lives.

Who has lived in the absence of suffering?

Who has not doubted God's justice? Who amongst us has not desired to raise Job's questions? Job challenges common sense and self-help literature and proposes a reality where pain and suffering can be addressed, where emotions and feelings about God are given the freedom to evolve.[30] For those of us suffocating under an avalanche of poor health, bouts with depression, economic stress, age issues, housing struggles, and parental anxiety, Job proposes that a perspective other than our own exists. This is hard to hear and even more difficult to bear. Job's claim that birth is a tragedy and death is welcome relief may support the assessment, "There is nothing soothing or explanatory" in Job's chapters.[31] But, for one seeking honest and transcendent dialogue, Job is eternally satisfying.

Imaginations can be as active in adults as they were when we were eight. May the preaching you perform allow you to live imaginatively in scripture. Read it. Meditate on it and savor its beauty and power in every phrase and story. Sense God's presence and ask God to govern your imagination and thus your life.

Do not be afraid to open Job's paradigmatic texts. Do not be afraid to be a storyteller. Do not be afraid to be fresh. Do not be afraid to tether your congregation to the world imagined in Job. Do not be afraid to address the church with the language and perspective of Job, which is out of synch with what we desire to hear in our crises. Do not be afraid because our people are near death apart from the world imagined in the paradigmatic texts in scripture.

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**ENDNOTES**

1 "If the good dream and the resonant memory are offspring of the narrative imagination, so also are lies, slanders, gossip, aggressive confidences, persuasive temptations, secrets, deceits and cold reserve," Barbara Hardy, *Tellers and Listeners: The Narrative Imagination* (London: The Athlone Press University of London, 1975), 102.
2 There should be no surprise to hear similar language come from the mouth of an atheist. Consider the "reasonable declaration" of Yann Mantel's character, Mr. Kumar, "There are no grounds for going beyond a scientific explanation of reality and no sound reason for believing anything but our sense experience. A clear intellect, close attention to detail and a little scientific knowledge will expose religion as superstitious bosh. God does not exist." Yann Mantel, *Life of Pi* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), 27.
3 Bertrand Russell in Garrison Keillor, *Writers' Almanac*, Minnesota Public Radio, newsletter@mpr.org, November 11, 2003.
4 Garrett Green argues persuasively that the Bible often uses the term *heart* when speaking of *imagination*. Both words, he observes, are the seat of intellectual and emotional functions. Most important for Green, *imagination* and *heart* are the point at which human and divine come into contact. Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989), 105-113.
5 Bruce Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah, 2000), 18.
6 Jackson W. Carroll, "Pastors' Picks: What Preachers are Reading," *Christian Century* (August 23, 2003): 33.
7 W. Ward Gasque bemoans the current dilemma, "It's sad to see the death of the learned clergy … No wonder the profession of pastor is held in such low esteem these days." *Christian Century* (November 15, 2003): 44. Missing from Carroll's study was the discovery from a casual visit to the minister's office: a library dated from days in seminary, college, or preaching school.
8 Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez*, 7. Jabez reflects the American ideal of bounty but misses the prayer Jesus taught ("Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness") which in Matthew sums up the first half of the Lord's Prayer. In Wilkinson's contrasting world, the "spiritual giant" begins his prayers, "Oh Lord, … bless me!" According to the Jabez model, we first ask God to expand our borders and then we will sense our need for God.
9 Ordained in midlife, Conwell preached at Philadelphia's Grace Baptist Church, which, in the 1890s, became the largest Protestant church in the country. A philanthropist as well, Conwell founded a night school which became Temple University. For Conwell, "Business success … underlies all true success, the foundation that underlies Christianity and morality." See Russell Conwell, "Acres of Diamonds," in Ronald F. Reid, *Three Centuries of American Rhetorical Discourse* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1988), 580.
10 From a rhetorical perspective, the entire speech functions like the moral within its shorter narratives: find out what people want and give it to them. For *Acres of Diamonds* as part of the American sociological myth, see Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), especially the chapter, "Mythic Dimensions of American Capitalism," 126-152.
11 Green, Imagining God, 134.
12 Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (Grand Rapids: Harper & Row, 1989), 68f.
13 Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 2.
14 Ibid., 200.
15 Somewhere in *Tellers and Listeners*, Barbara Hardy captivatingly writes, "We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative."
16 Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 20. "How then do we fund the imagination?" Brueggemann suggests we do this by providing "the pieces, materials, and resources out of which a new world can be imagined. [Preaching's] responsibility, then, is not a grand scheme or a coherent system, but the voicing of a lot of little pieces out of which people can put life together in fresh configurations," 20. Bruggemann's thoughts are echoed in Thomas G. Long, "Seasons of Preaching," *Tipple-Vosburgh Lectures*, Drew Theological Seminary, October 18, 2000.
17 See Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, for places where he underscores Israel's use of the Exodus.
18 I Cor 15:1-5.
19 Matt 23:23.

20 Thomas Olbricht in his graduate classes made the concept clear when he likened scripture to currency of differing value. "All currency has value; it's just that some bills are worth much more than others," *Hearing God's Voice* (Abilene, Texas: ACU Press, 1996), 340.
21 Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 2002.
22 See www.purposedrivenlife.com, where Rick Warren welcomes the viewer, "My prayer is that this website will help you as you pursue God's purpose for your life. You were created by God for a very specific reason, and only you are qualified to fulfill the mission God has placed within your very DNA."
23 Green, *Imagining God*, 122.
24 For an accessible source, see Cleophus LaRue's analysis of Francis Grimke's sermons in *The Heart of Black Preaching*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1999, 44-54. Richard Lischer observes, "The rhetoric of Exodus was everywhere in those years," *The Preacher King*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Also see Keith Miller, *The Voice of Deliverance*, (University of Georgia Press, 1998). See Green, Imagining God, 52ff here.
25 Martin Luther King, Jr. "I've Been to the Mountain Top," *Texts in Context: Critical Dialogue on Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric*, eds. Michael C. Leff and Fred J. Kauffeld (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1989), 311-321.
26 "Now what does all of this mean in this great period of history? It means that we've got to stay together. We've got to stay together and maintain unity. You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. (applause) But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery. (applause) Now let us maintain unity." Excerpt from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I've been to the Mountaintop" in Leff and Kauffeld, Texts in Context, 313. Transcription from an audiotape of the speech as it was delivered at Mason Temple, Memphis, Tennessee, on the evening of April 3, 1968.
27 Green, 54.
28 Lindbeck, 62.
29 Eudora Welty's oft-referenced quote is worth full citation here, "How many of us, the South's writers-to-be of my generation, were blessed in one way or another, if not blessed alike, in not having gone deprived of the King James Version of the Bible. Its cadence entered into our ears and our memories for good. The evidence, or the ghost of it, lingers in all our books. 'In the beginning was the Word.'" Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings* (New York: Warner, 1983), 37. Other literary artists have confessed their dependence to the rhymes and cadences in scripture. If the preacher were to share such devotion to the style of scripture in one's preaching (the form of the content), some attention to creating a manuscript before delivery is essential. See Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 158, for a complementary discussion.
30 This is the case with Job. The narrator clearly marks the evolution, first telling us after the first tragedy, "Job did not sin" (1:22), after the second "Job did not sin with his lips" (2:10), but finally that Job "opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth" (3:1).
31 Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVaristy Press, 1985), 71.