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The Word is Near to You: Preaching Beyond Analogy

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I have heard this sermon before. No, not this exact sermon. It is not from the same text, doesn't use the same illustrations, or even make the same points as other sermons heard recently. Still, as the preacher winds up the sermon this Sunday I have the feeling of "been there, done that," a familiar feeling these days.

Many sermons are beginning to sound alike. It's not what the preachers say that makes them alike, but how the sermons move. Let the worship deejay play a different kind of music, something with a different beat, so that the sermon will be forced to dance a different step.

The complaint here is not so much that preaching is in a rut (though it is a point that many of us who preach could take to heart). The complaint is that this particular rut—week in and week out—keeps us a long way from the world scripture would create. Let me be clear here. Nearly all of these sermons take a text. Most are expository in some sense. However, throughout the sermon, the text is held at an arms length from the listener.

THIS IS THAT?

The sermons I have in mind proceed in a three-fold way and move by way of analogy. An analogy compares a "this" to a "that." Analogy-driven sermons flow in the following manner: this is this ➔ that is that ➔ this is that. "This" is the contemporary world. "That" is the biblical world (or more precisely the world in which the text was produced). The trick in this kind of preaching is to find just the right analogy so modern listeners will have a "bridge" that makes the ancient message contemporary and relevant—"this is that."[1]

I would estimate that 90 percent of the sermons I hear these days begin with a lengthy contemporary analogy. For instance, in a recent sermon on Eph 2:11-22,[2] we began in a contemporary shopping mall—the mall held up as a symbol of postmodern religious sensibilities. In this opening section, the text is only anticipated. The text's language, images, and movements are missing. The frame for the sermon is being built with non-biblical materials, common for sermons moving to this rhythm.

The middle move of these sermons usually turns our attention to the text. However, during this section, the listener is often invited to be a distant observer to Bible land, a land trapped in a very distant past. We stand at a safe, historical distance from the text as it is analyzed or explained. Listener involvement in the world of the text is low.[3] The text becomes a distant "that."

In the Ephesians 2 sermon, the preacher tells us that ancient Ephesus is not so different from our contemporary, shopping mall, religious world. In this part of the sermon we get historical background, a sense of the original audience and intention of the author, and a few of the points the author is making to these distant listeners. We anticipate that these points will eventually be important to us as well. However, we overhear the message of the text as a word intended for an ancient "them." The text does not address us directly.

It is common in this middle section of the sermon for the text to lie still so that we might examine it. The text is explained, reduced to a set of points. The text does not perform. Its images and rhythms lie virtually lifeless on the written page. In the Ephesians 2 sermon, the striking images of the text are surprisingly ignored. The dividing wall of hostility is not destroyed; the spiritual dwelling of God, built brick by human brick is never erected.

The irony in many such sermons is great. In the opening moves, we are called upon to exercise our imaginations. We are called to join a story, or asked to conceive of an improbable scenario, or set our minds to a thorny problem. But when we turn to the text, we are asked to take off our imaginative hats for analytical ones.

The sermon from Ephesians 2 ends with a return to the shopping mall. The preacher encourages us to apply the principles we have extracted from the text to our contemporary analogy. As is often the case with the "this is that" part of the sermon, the biblical language is left behind as the preacher finishes framing the sermon in the imagery of the contemporary analogy. In fact, in these sermons, the text functions more analogically than the contemporary context. What is most formative in the sermon is the contemporary language. The text is used as a reassurance that our current circumstances are anticipated in scripture.

Analogy-driven sermons can be spectacularly gripping. They can deliver the goods, biblically speaking. Sometimes the indirection that accompanies speaking by analogy is just the right sermon strategy. However, there are problems with thinking of the sermon primarily in analogical terms. For instance, analogies are terribly difficult to calibrate to the text. Discovering the dynamic equivalent necessary to translate the text faithfully into contemporary experience is an elusive quest. The analogies either appear trivial in comparison to the text—or more often, because of their strong resonance with the listener's experience—they overwhelm the imagery of the text. Every preacher experiences the frustration of listeners remembering only the illustration, leaving behind the text that was the focus of the illustration.

The chief criticism, however, with analogy-driven sermons is that they keep the text and listener worlds apart. There is a great irony here. The hope of analogy-driven sermons is to bring the listener closer to the distant world of the text. However, the opposite effect is often the case as listener and text rarely occupy common ground in the sermon. The historical distance between text and listener is maintained throughout. As a result, sermons lose the dramatic immediacy associated with the word of God.

The hope of this article is to lead preaching beyond analogy-driven sermons and find directions for sermons that keep text and listener near to each other.

BEYOND THE HOMILETICAL BRIDGE

Patterns of preaching are necessarily tied to understandings of biblical interpretation. Simply put, our views of the text influence our understandings of the preaching task. Ironically, our uses of scripture do not correspond to the uses of scripture modeled by the biblical writers. By letting the biblical writers lead, preachers can learn a few new homiletical moves that will lead us beyond analogy-driven sermons.

The sermon from Ephesians 2 we have described is a textbook example of what is referred to as a bridge sermon. The bridge theory of homiletics conceives the task of preaching primarily in historical terms. That is, the sermon is an attempt to construct a bridge that connects the ancient world to the contemporary world. It is the homiletical counterpart to the historical-critical exegetical method, which attempts to isolate the author's original intent (a that) so that it can in turn be translated into contemporary terms (a this). As my

exegesis professor taught, "one cannot know what a text means until one determines what it meant." Bridge sermons, moving primarily by way of analogy, honor this historical distance.

Recently, the bridge theory of preaching has come under criticism. Critics charge that bridge preaching focuses so much on the content of a specific text that larger issues of gospel and theology are ignored. Ironically, bridge sermons often begin with a text but conclude with messages that do not correspond to the larger themes of the gospel.[4] Although this observation has merit, I would like to broaden the criticism to suggest that the bridge theory encourages non-biblical instincts with regard to how a sermon moves or speaks, robbing the sermon of the vital energy that comes from the nearness of the word of God.

Biblical writers assumed a vital nearness of the word when dealing with the words of scripture. What Richard Hays says of Paul might be applied to all biblical writers, "The Bible for Paul is not just a chronicle of revelation in the past; the words of scripture sound from the page *in the present moment* and address the community of believers with authority."[5] For the biblical authors, scripture is more than an artifact that represents a specific historical context; it is a living voice.

To use Paul's language, "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (Rom 10:8). The text doesn't just represent a historical reality. It creates a reality, new in every reading.[6] The word of God speaks primarily in the present tense.

> **Though the biblical writers display a variety of approaches to reading the text, they seem to share this much in common: they do not see the task of interpretation primarily in historical terms.**

Assuming the immediacy of the biblical text does not mean that preaching should assume a one-to-one correspondence between the words of scripture and our current context. In other words, the words of the text must be interpreted for a contemporary audience. When scripture uses scripture, the biblical writers do not woodenly parrot the words of the Bible and rub out all differences in context. They creatively appropriate traditional sayings or stories to speak in a new way to a new situation, sometimes altering significantly what the original text indicated.

Nor do the biblical writers employ only one reading strategy. Sometimes they interpret texts literally, sometimes typologically, sometimes morally. Though the biblical writers display a variety of approaches to reading the text, they seem to share this much in common: they do not see the task of interpretation primarily in historical terms.

Faithful interpretation does not come so much from comparing and contrasting historical contexts. Rather, faithful interpretation comes with theological and spiritual commitments combined with an imaginative dwelling within the world of scripture.[7]

According to Hans Frei, the modern project, characterized in biblical studies by the historical-critical method, led us away from an earlier epoch of Bible reading in which people dwelt imaginatively in the world of scripture.[8] Modern interpreters of scripture have been more concerned with the "world that produced the text" than with the "world the text would produce."[9]

Walter Brueggemann calls preachers precisely back to this world created by the text. For Brueggemann, biblical texts do not merely represent the ancient world—the texts are a world to themselves. The world of the biblical text emerges through the preacher's "artistic attentiveness" to "the exact placement and performance of words and phrases, of sounds and repetitions that give rise to an alternative sense of reality that was not available without this particular configuration of words and images."[10]

Preaching, therefore, cannot be content to extract a point or feeling from the text and make analogy by way of contemporary experience. The text is not simply an archaic way of naming what we already know or experience; the text is a *living voice* that evokes an *alternative world*. The sermon cannot be content to say

"this is that" but must resound, "Other!" This constructed world is neither ancient nor contemporary but is a place that renames our contemporary experience. This new world, the world of the living voice of God, is a present and coming world speaking with a dramatic immediacy.[11]

Instead of thinking of the sermon as a bridge that connects two historically separated worlds, I suggest we follow Brueggemann's lead and think of the sermon as a script that allows the text to perform on a contemporary stage.[12] The actors in this script are not just Jesus or Peter or Paul. The actors are the images and structures of the text that enliven this imagined world. They are invited to play their parts and speak their lines.

In this drama, the living voice of scripture joins the contemporary realities of the living God in ways that produce a new, vital, and immediate performance of the word. This word is near to us. It is not trapped in the grip of its original context, but through faithful imagination comes to us in the present tense.

THE WORD IS NEAR TO US

Obviously, a move to a different kind of sermon begins with new reading strategies with regard to the text.[13] Readings that emphasize the performative aspects of the text will yield sermon strategies that invite the text to perform. The focus of this essay, however, is the sermon itself. How do sermons not controlled by analogical concerns act? What would sermons look like that take as their beginning questions, "What in this text wants to perform?" and "How can the sermon function as a script for a new performance of the text?"

These kinds of formative questions take us beyond formulaic approaches to homiletics. Too often, homiletics has been concerned with the external form of the sermon. Should the sermon proceed inductively or deductively? I am not suggesting that sermons be inductive or deductive, narrative or propositional. Rather, what follows are values that would keep the sermon in a mode of immediacy regardless of its formal characteristics.

The following six suggestions are offered as commitments aimed at recovering a sense of scripture's living voice. These values are not absolutes or homiletical laws that must be followed to guarantee immediacy. Rather, these values inform the various decisions that go into constructing a sermon that aims to make scripture's voice more dramatic, direct, and engaging.

Assume nearness. While this value seems obvious given what we've said to this point, changing the preacher's mindset with regard to the sermon might be the biggest shift required to produce a different sort of sermon. In contrast to the analogy-driven sermon, the preacher is looking for the straightest line between the text and the listener. Instead of saying, "Paul said to the Corinthians ... the application for us today is ... " nearness in a sermon sounds more like this, "Paul does not want to be misunderstood today. His message for us is ..."

Speak as often as possible in the present tense. There are many ways to exhibit a commitment to nearness in a sermon. Perhaps the most effective is to preach using present-tense verbs. My colleague Stephen Johnson requires his preaching students to listen to sermons and indicate those places they are most engaged. According to these students, one of the greatest predictors of listener engagement is present-tense speech.

Speaking in the present tense brings a sense of proximity between speaker and listener. Listeners hear a difference between "Jesus said ...," and "Jesus says ... " From my own preaching experience, I know the commitment to speaking in the present tense requires greater creativity and often leads me in surprising directions within the sermon.

Keep the text and listener in the same world as often as possible. In other words, let the text perform in the parts of the sermon that are more contemporary and let the listeners be active in the parts that are primarily interested in the world of the text. Holding worlds together requires creativity and imagination (hallmarks of good preaching) and is often done allusively and/or anachronistically. Consider these brief examples:

So, we have come to Paul today because we have a little evangelistic laryngitis. We've knocked on the door of 2 Corinthians to see if Paul might be able to help us find our words, or our nerve, or something, because we've taken our eye off the evangelistic ball somewhere along the way. Now we can do community service. Build houses for Habitat for Humanity, or provide thanksgiving meals, or any number of acts of service—and praise God for these. But we've lost our voice evangelistically. And we want to be evangelistic. We really do. We'll never really feel like a church unless we are. And so, we've knocked on Paul's door today, hoping he'll administer a little evangelistic heimlich, clear the old windpipe to get the words flowing again.

Hebrews has brought us to a miserable place to attend church today. Who would want to go to church here? And so we don't. We forsake the assembly. Some of us make it a habit. The list of acceptable reasons for missing church grows longer and longer. Our family needs a little quality time. There are only 14 more ski weekends this season. The car might not start, and do we really want to take that chance? When it comes to finding energy for church we are droopy handed and weak kneed.

And so this man, Elimolech, packs up his family to find food and travels to the east across the Jordan River to the land of Moab—to live among foreigners—to live among the Moabites—of whom the Bible has nothing very nice to say. In the book of Judges the Moabites oppress Israel. Deut 23 forbids you to even invite a Moabite to church. This isn't a move down the block, or a job relocation to Dallas, this is the move of a desperate man looking for bread anywhere he can find it—even if it means living among the Moabites. This is Archie Bunker in Harlem, Roger Staubach playing for the Redskins. Nothing good can come from this.

Notice that in the first example, the scene is contemporary. The listeners have questions about evangelism. Paul is also portrayed as a contemporary as the listeners knock on his door (2 Corinthians) to ask questions of him. In the second example, the book of Hebrews is the setting. The listeners are portrayed as attending church "today" within the world described by Hebrews. In the third example, the story of Ruth is being told with allusions made to contemporary situations. In each example, both text and listener are active.

Let the text have the first word. Often, the first movement of the sermon sets the image grid for the bulk of the sermon. Most sermons, particularly inductive sermons, seek a certain symmetry. The problem posed at the beginning is solved at the end. This symmetry requires a consistency of images so that the hearer will make the connections. By allowing the text to have first word, the sermon is more likely to build on textual images and rhythms. The text is given greater movement within which to perform.

Those of us who prefer inductive strategies have a more difficult time allowing the text the first word. Induction typically moves from problem to solution. We want the text to provide the clue that solves our problem. So we begin with a contemporary problem and allow the text to bring answers later. Still, there are ways for the text to speak first and for the sermon to still move fairly inductively. By stating the claim of the text in the opening move, we often discover that we live a long ways from the world proclaimed in scripture.

Letting the text speak first, in the present tense, is a dramatic way to begin a sermon. For example, consider the beginning of this sermon from Romans 15.

Today Paul stands in our presence and raises his hands to bless us. He extends his arms over the congregation, like God's sheltering wings, to speak over us words of his care. "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant to you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together with one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

But this is not enough; he wants us today to be doubly blessed. So a few verses later, he

raises his hands again. Again he opens his mouth to break open the storehouse of heaven on
our behalf. Today, two helpings of grace.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound
in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

Paul blesses us today for worship. Who wouldn't want to go to church here today?!

In this example, the preacher dramatically enacts Paul's offering of a blessing to the people of God. The
listeners experience the blessing as the text is performed in their hearing. The first words of the sermon sig-
nal to the listeners that this text addresses them directly. Each subsequent movement of the sermon will by
necessity be heard and understood within the context of this initial word of blessing.

First words dramatically frame the sermon. As often as possible, let scripture have the first word.

Let the images of the text pervade, especially in moves that are more contemporary. As mentioned previ-
ously, the words and phrases of the text should be thought of as actors who want to perform in the sermon.
The lead actors in the sermon should be biblical. Hence, I want them to play in as many scenes as possible.
For example, in preaching from Ephesians 2, the notion of "dwelling place" wants to perform throughout the
sermon. A contemporary scene that continues the thread of dwelling place begun in the first part of the ser-
mon might look like this:

So, let's play realtor for a minute. Where would we find a dwelling place for God? I mean,
what neighborhood would we look in. We'd want to be near good schools. Maybe right
across the street from a Christian college.[14]

We'll need a flyer. Take a picture of the cornerstone: "This church established in 33 A.D.
This building erected in 1957." List the amenities. What do we put in our ad for the paper?
Well, of course, we want to mention we're a Church of Christ (lower case or upper case on
the "c"?). And that we have elders and deacons. That we've grown lately. Well, we'll want
to say something about our worship. Everyone these days is looking for contemporary and
dynamic. How could we expect God to dwell in less than a dynamic worship environment?
Do we have a mission statement or something? We should say something about what we
believe and practice. Believer's baptism for the remission of sins, weekly observance of the
Lord's Supper, acapella singing. Don't forget all the money we give to missions.

So, do we have a decent listing for "dwelling place for God?" I don't know. Dwelling place
for God is a pretty tall order. I have this sinking sense that this place looks a little too much
like us to be a suitable dwelling place for God.

In this example, the very contemporary image of a real-estate listing serves a controlling image from the
text: a spiritual dwelling place for God.

Learn to speak with echoes and allusions. Biblical texts reveal a densely textured world where words,
phrases, and cadences echo other texts or familiar images. A bare reference leads the listener into a larger
world of meaning. An allusion to another reality allows worlds to mingle without breaking the continuity of
argument or narration for the sake of illustration.

Echoes and allusions are structurally small units of speech that enlarge imaginative space far beyond
their limited size. In contrast, stories and long illustrations often decrease the imaginative landscape by
funneling things into a single interpretative grid. Larger analogous structures tend to overwhelm all other
aspects of the sermon so that they become the dominant point of reference, closing down all other imagina-
tive options.

I use echoes and allusions to cut both directions (textual and contemporary). In narrating the text, contemporary allusions remind listeners that this text speaks to them. When occupying a contemporary stance in the sermon, biblical echoes remind the listener that the world of the text is always present, reading over our shoulder.[15]

VALUES HELP RECOVER DYNAMIC SENSE OF WORD

Let me reiterate at this point, what are offered in this article are values, not homiletical laws. These values serve the goal of allowing the text to perform in ways that bring a greater sense of the dramatic immediacy of the living word of God.

Note that sometimes the historical distance of the text needs to be honored, even accentuated. Sometimes, a lengthy story or illustration is what delivers the text to the audience in a way that best allows the text to perform. Sometimes the sermon will visit Bible-land and speak in the past tense.

Still, a general commitment to speaking in the present tense, to letting the text have the first word, to holding listener and text together, to letting the images of the text control the sermon will allow sermons over time to communicate the nearness of the word of God. These values are offered as ways to recover a more immediate and dynamic sense of the "Word that is near to us" in preaching.

A renewed sense of the immediacy of the word will draw us into new rhythms for preaching that move beyond analogy and allow us to enter an alternative world created by scripture.

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END NOTES

1   For an able defense of analogy and its use in preaching, see Stephen Farris, *Preaching that Matters: The Bible and Our Lives* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998). Of course, there is no way to communicate anything apart from comparisons, or analogies. However, what I am critiquing is a way of conceiving preaching that sees its primary task as drawing analogies between two historically distant realities, namely the ancient world that produced the biblical text and the contemporary world.

2   Though I will be critiquing this sermon throughout the essay, it was a very well crafted and delivered message. It was a good example of what analogy preaching can be. However, it also demonstrated the weaknesses of the approach. Primarily, the text sat on the bench through the entire sermon and never got a chance to get in the game.

3   To use David Buttrick's terminology, the stance of the sermon is in the contemporary world. The focal field is the biblical context. The distance between stance and focal field is great. Lens depth and focal depth are fairly shallow. Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 55-68.

4   See Edward Farley, "Toward a New Paradigm for Preaching," *Preaching as a Theological Task: Word, Gospel, Scripture (In Honor of David Buttrick),* eds. E. Farley and T.G. Long (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996), 165-75. Although I hold to Farley's assertion that our duty is to preach the gospel and not a text, I am more optimistic than he is about one's ability to do this by taking a text each week.

5   Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 165. Italics added.

6   I am consciously using the words "represent" and "create" to indicate two different views of language. Modern epistemologies were built on the assumption that language was referential: words represented the objects to which they referred. More recent views of language tend to emphasize the "performative" nature of language: words do not simply represent reality; as they are used (perform), they create reality. The performative understanding of language corresponds better to biblical notions of the word as God's creative speech. One implication of such a view of language is that one set of words cannot simply stand in for another set. Analogy sermons assume that modern words, images, and concepts can represent the words of the text more effectively to the modern hearer. This view fails to appreciate the unique world created through the performance of the text.

7   Hays's work is compelling at this point. For his understanding of Paul's theological commitments in the interpretation of Old Testament texts, see *Echoes*, 178-192. See also David Bartlett, *Between the Bible and the Church: New Methods for Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 11-36.

8   Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

9   This sentiment can be found in many places. See for example, Luke Johnson as quoted by David Fleer, "Introduction," *Preaching Hebrews: Rochester Lectures on Preaching*, vol. 4, eds. D. Fleer and D. Bland (Abilene, Texas: ACU Press,

2003), 3. This kind of analysis borrows from Paul Ricouer's notions of the three worlds related to the text that are in play in interpretation: the world behind the text, the world of the text, and the world before the text. The bridge theory is concerned with the world behind the text and the world before the text but often ignores the world of the text.

10 Walter Brueggemann, "That the World May Be Redescribed," *Interpretation* 56 (October 2002): 359-67. See also Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997).

11 See my essay, "Funding the Sermon with Theological Imagination," *Preaching Romans: Rochester Lectures on Preaching*, vol. 4, eds. D. Fleer and D. Bland (Abilene, Texas: ACU Press, 2002): 127-48.

12 This notion is also described as a rereading of scripture by Patrick J. Willson and Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "Preaching as the Re-reading of Scripture," *Interpretation* 52 (October 1998): 392-406. I like the term script because it assumes movement, character, and perspective. It encourages the notion that the faith is not so much a set of ideas to be believed but more a story to be lived. The term script also allows the notion of performance back into our homiletic vocabulary in ways that overcome associations with the preacher's personality or manipulative theatrics.

13 See Steven Johnson's article in this issue of *Leaven*.

14 I preached this sermon at the University Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas, which is located across the street from the campus of Abilene Christian University.

15 Using smaller analogous structures allows the sermon to function more as a metaphor than as an analogy. Instead of saying "this is that," a metaphor wants to say, "this is this." This matches Hays's description of Paul's readings of scripture. "These readings are contingent acts of imagination, not fixed doctrinal formulations. They take shape only within the intertextual character of his letters: provoked by a challenge, struck by an analogy, Paul draws Scripture and pastoral situation together, making metaphors at the intersections." *Echoes*, 167. This is the essence of preaching—making metaphors at the intersections.