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What Might God Do Next? Homiletical Trajectories for a Dangerous Future

KEN DURHAM

This presentation was made on October 25 at the 2011 Lipscomb University Preaching Workshop.

Text: Isaiah 43

- 1 But now, this is what the LORD says—
he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel:
“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
- 2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
- 3 For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;
- 11 I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no savior;
- 12 I have revealed and saved and proclaimed—I, and not some foreign god among you.
You are my witness,” declares the LORD, “That I am God.”
- 16 That is what the LORD says—he who made a way through the sea,
a path through the mighty waters,
- 17 who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and
they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:
- 18 “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.
- 19 See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness, and streams in the wasteland.”

Let us pray: *Lord God, you have been our help in ages past, and you are our hope for years to come. Be our guide and strength as we move into an uncertain and chaotic future. May we learn from our past but not dwell in it, or on it. Give us the eyes to see the new things you are doing in our world, and the faith and courage to attune our lives and ministries to it. We would be truly yours, and be faithful to your calling of us as witnesses to your grace, by which we are gathered today. We pray it in the name of Jesus, through whom you make all things new. Amen.*

Introduction

Sometimes these days I hear rumors of the coming “death of preaching,” but I don’t buy it. I will admit that there is such a thing as “death *by* preaching,” something known to occur at times in the pulpit, and at times in the pew.

But George Barna of the religious research organization Barna Group, contends that preaching as we now know it must and will change. Within fifteen years, “the spiritual profile of the nation will be dramatically different” from today, with only one in three persons of faith in the United States looking to a local congregation as their primary means of spiritual instruction and experience. The other two-thirds, Barna says, will have turned to “alternative forms of faith-based communities”—worship and instruction “beyond the walls of the sanctuary”—those forms including cyber-church, concerts, art guilds, marketplace ministries, family home gatherings and other “micro-models” of Christian fellowship.¹

If that’s right (and I’m not convinced that it is), then we need to be asking what such change might portend for the shapes of preaching within these new models of being the church “beyond the walls of the sanctuary.”

Alfred North Whitehead famously said, “It is the business of the Future to be dangerous.” That’s true, and probably more so today than ever before in my lifetime. The culture changes that are underway and on the horizon are seismic. And that makes “risk-averse” preaching—safe little sermons promoting niceness or congratulating ourselves for our soundness—especially unacceptable today.

We might say as well, “It is the future of Business to be dangerous.” The effects of the current global recession have shaken us to the core, making us more fearful, more vulnerable, more angry. We’re seeing a wholesale recalibration of all things American: lifestyle, work, education, our very vision of the American future. “The New Normal” is looking more and more like “The New Austerity.”

According to someone’s estimate (and if the number is holding), this Sunday around 500,000 preachers of one sort or another will preach a sermon in English. As always, that man or woman in the pulpit will look out into a sea of faces full of expectation: “Convict us. Instruct us. Commission us. Revive us. Reassure us. Heal us. All of the above. Any of the above.” And more than ever, I think, those faces are saying: “Orient us. Empower us. Give us just some glimpse of the glory and heart and mind of God that will help us find traction in these destabilized times.”

All this at a time when the human race is interconnected—hyper-connected—as never before.² The so-called “Netlords”—Eric Schmidt of Google recently quipped about “the Four Horsemen of the Information Apocalypse”—Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google—have decidedly altered the landscape of interpersonal communication.³

Say what you will about the Internet, it certainly offers a veritable bottomless pit of sermon illustrations. Recently my son Gabe—a writer and writing instructor in Massachusetts—texted me to propose a new writing project, and wanting to be a supportive dad, I texted back a one-word response to his idea: “Excellent!” Except, I must have mistyped a letter, because my all-knowing iPhone changed my response to read “Excrement!” Not the review I intended to send my boy.

When it comes to human messaging, the scope and magnitude of what’s happening is just mind-bending. The Internet hasn’t turned thirty yet (1982), and 300 billion e-mails were sent last year. There are currently 800 million active users on Facebook, and 97 percent of all two-way telecommunications today are through the Net. And just wait till the rest of the world catches up, and the number of Internet users doubles between now and 2020.⁴ Net-wise, we are increasingly logged on, LinkedIn and stressed out.

I confess to you that, with the staggering multiplication of words and messages and conversations, I sometimes despair over the efficacy of simple spoken words—mine in particular—to gain a hearing. And I lose sight of something that has driven and defined me over my thirty-seven years of ministry. I forget the power of a word, of a single Word from the mouth of God.

I forget that “his word does not return to him void” (Isa 55.11). I forget that the gospel is the power of God to save (Rom 1.16). I forget that the word of God is a living and active thing that penetrates and lays bare every

1. George Barna, *Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2005), 49, 61–67.

2. Niall Ferguson, “World on Wi-Fire,” *Newsweek*, (October 10–17, 2011): 4.

3. *Ibid.*, 4.

4. *Ibid.*, 6.

thought, attitude and pretense (Heb 4.12). And I forget that the quality of the Divine Word I have been called to preach is undiminished and undimmed by the quantity of mere verbiage I so often feel overwhelmed by.

The first rhetorical lesson of Genesis is that by that Word, all that we are and love and dream, came to be. That there was not anything before God spoke a Word—no capacity to imagine or discover or tweet or digitize—until he created, *ex nihilo*, form from formlessness, fullness from emptiness, goodness from chaos. A Word did that! God's.

How exhilarating then (not to mention preposterous) it is that you and I get to be stewards of that Word—the very “oracles of God”⁵—for “such a time as this,” when our world is so informed yet so unwise, so connected yet so lonely.

As Dr. Brueggemann has said, “You preachers are world-makers. In your words, you make a new world. And if you won't let God use you to render a new world, then all you can do is to service the old one...and that's no fun.”⁶

If we are indeed a culture undergoing “recalibration”—if the whole narrative of the American Dream is in the midst of a profound redefinition (and that's not a bad thing), and a lot of folks are thinking that maybe listening to a sermon on Sunday morning is an optional exercise in spiritual formation—then what better time to say, “Turn in your Bibles to page one.”

So with Genesis before us, I want to ask: What are some preaching trajectories that might commend themselves for a dangerous future?

“Trajectory”: the path of a missile. So what are some worthy and potentially effective paths? Probably more importantly, what is the missile? Let me first identify the missile as Jesus Christ and him crucified,⁷ and what that preeminent truth tells us about God's priorities and promises for his creation. But my present concern—which will focus more on homiletical theme than form—is, how do we give the living Word its best chance to do its transformational work on heart and mind today? And how do I approach the question of my homiletical success without my concern being wholly ego-driven and performance-obsessed?

One Sunday little Kendra Beasley—she was about seven—announced to me after the morning service that she had done a word-count (counted my main words) during the sermon. How precious, I thought. “Well, let's see that list,” I said stupidly in front of a small crowd that had gathered there in the church lobby. Kendra's list looked something like this: GOD—4, JESUS—5, LOVE—3, CHURCH—19, ME—27, I—53, MY—24. I wanted to call for a recount, but that would have sounded a tad defensive. I was busted, and I knew it.

Still, narcissism aside (as if that were possible), we ask: How might we more effectively preach the gospel in our time? That's our question this morning, and it's a right and proper question, as long as it is joined to the question raised earlier by Isaiah: What is God doing in our time?—this God who “summoned us by name” and made us “his witnesses”? If we buy the assumption that God's creative work is ongoing—dynamic, not static—then, what are God's “new things” for our logged-on, Linked-in, stressed-out world?

As I try to imagine some “new things” God might have in store for our preaching, I'm going to identify three “Movements” I find rooted in the revelation of early Genesis (the doctrines of Creation). My three key words: authenticity, stewardship, music.

(The slant I'm taking here is modeled in part along the lines of a message delivered by Barbara Brown Taylor at the 1995 Festival of Homiletics, when she spoke on “Preaching into the Next Millennium.”⁸ “How,” she asked, “do we honor the tradition we have received from our ancestors [in our particular fellowship] without worshiping them instead of God? How do we declare what God has done without shutting ourselves down to what God may do next?”⁹)

5. 1 Peter 4.11 KJV.

6. Quoted by Willimon in Martin Copenhaver, Anthony Robinson and William Willimon, *Good News in Exile: Three Pastors Offer a Hopeful Vision for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 113.

7. 1 Corinthians 1.18–25.

8. Published as Barbara Brown Taylor, “Preaching into the Next Millennium,” *Journal for Preachers* (Easter 1996): 25–31.

9. *Ibid.*, 27.

Toward a More Authentic Humanity in our Preaching

The authority we once assumed was automatically ours simply by stepping into the pulpit with Bible in hand—well, that notion left town a good while back. For instance, in my homiletics classes (old-school guy that I am), I like to talk about the place that the Bible—physically—occupies in the delivery of a sermon. (Batsell Barrett Baxter had a distinctive way of holding a Bible that for years was recognizably present in the pulpit style of many of his preaching students). My point is, don't let your listeners forget where your sermon is coming from, what constitutes the basis—the bedrock—of your authority as a witness. But lately I've been getting some pushback on that from my under-thirty preaching students. "No," they tell me, "standing up front with a big old Bible in hand is a turn-off to a lot of us—smacks of an authoritarian spirit, of power-tripping." I didn't see that one coming. (And I haven't yet figured out what to do with it.)

Maybe because so many young adults feel they've been manipulated and disappointed by their authority figures (their preachers included), "authority" has become not only a suspect claim, but even a suspect virtue. They increasingly want a message from a messenger who is "real." Genuine. Plainspoken. Relatable. The coin of the realm, the hands-down credibility-builder that trumps all others today—is authenticity.

But I suspect you know that. This is so well known today that "authentic" has become the golden claim on the lips of virtually every celebrity, presidential candidate and online dating hopeful. "I think what people see in me is that I'm a real person," Michelle Bachmann told ABC News after her straw-poll victory in Iowa. "I'm authentic." Or Anderson Cooper of CNN in a recent interview: "In everything I've done, I've always tried to just be authentic and real."¹⁰

The obvious danger here is that this can easily come across as what one media expert calls "calculated authenticity."¹¹ Which suggests, while authenticity is a quality we may indeed yearn and pray for, it's probably not something we want to spotlight in ourselves (like when Screwtape suggested to Wormwood that he plant the thought in his Christian "patient's" brain, "By jove! I'm being humble!"¹² But inasmuch as "reality shows" are anything but, and as more and more folks cultivate the most appealing digital versions of themselves online (one student said, "Facebook is me on my best day"¹³), should we not expect the yearning for real authenticity (is that redundant?) only to intensify?

What I believe we'll continue to see in ever-increasing measure is a hunger for plainspoken messengers of the gospel who can speak directly to the quest for a genuine experience of God and life and purpose, who can speak candidly about their struggle to find that. And what better place to begin addressing the notion of what constitutes authentic humanity than Genesis 1? What better place to begin to recalibrate and re-imagine our notion of why women and men are here?

Genesis 1:26–27. This passage, as we say, will preach.

Where did we get the notion of human dignity in the first place? Of "civil rights"? What makes a person worthy of having his or her rights—their very humanity—respected? Dr. King liked to say, it's the *imago dei*. It was, for him, the key theological rationale for the American Civil Rights Movement.

"You see, [he said in his 1965 speech "The American Dream"] the founding fathers were really influenced by the Bible. The whole concept of the *imago dei*, as it is expressed in Latin, the 'image of God,' is the idea that all men have something within them that God injected...a capacity to have fellowship with God. And this gives him uniqueness, it gives him worth, it gives him dignity. There are no gradations in the image of God—every man from a treble white to a bass black is significant on God's keyboard, precisely because every man is made in the image of God."¹⁴

10. Stephanie Rosenbloom, "Authentic? Get Real," *New York Times* (September 9, 2011).

11. Ibid.

12. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1942), letter 14, 71.

13. Rosenbloom, "Authentic?"

14. Martin Luther King, "The American Dream," July 4, 1965.

For Martin Luther King Jr., being made in God's image meant that human beings have not only the right but also the power to reshape society and to build what he called a "beloved community" on earth.¹⁵ That's a theme that resonates powerfully with young adults, with anyone with a heart for social justice.

This, it seems to me, has often been a much under-preached theological theme among us. We've covered the doctrine of *a cappella* music pretty thoroughly, and we've shown proper respect for the doctrine of baptism (as we should). Good Creation-preaching, it seems to me, can help locate and recalibrate notions of authentic humanity and value, not according to old, failing, toxic cultural notions of personal power and conspicuous consumption and racial superiority and the self-made self, but in the image of a just and merciful God.

What, after all, do you get in a culture, in a world, that devalues or lacks the very assumption of the *imago dei*? You get more racism, more sexism, more terrorism, more homophobia, more human trafficking. And all you have to restrain us from cursing and exploiting one another with impunity are laws and etiquette. We need a better reason to love neighbor and enemy, and a greater power to make it possible. The *imago dei* leads us to both. And it leads us straight to Christ and him crucified—to him who is, Paul said, the fullest "image [*eikon*] of the invisible God."¹⁶

Barbara Brown Taylor saw this heightened craving for authenticity in the pulpit—in both message and messenger—coming, when she said, "In the next millennium, knowledge *about* God will not preach. Knowledge *of* God will."¹⁷ "We would see Jesus,"¹⁸ they asked Philip in John 12. More than ever, today, Taylor says, "They want to see Jesus, or at least someone who knows Jesus, and God help us if we offer them less than that."¹⁹

There is no substitute for content in our preaching, if it is to be biblical. But our people yearn to see as well our unapologetic passion for God; it's what for many of them "authenticates" our content.

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the late Welsh preacher (and physician), wrote:

"What is preaching? Logic on fire! Eloquent reason! Are these contradictions? Of course they are not. [Biblical preaching] is theology on fire. And a theology that does not take fire, I maintain, is a defective theology; or at least the man's understanding of it is defective. Preaching is theology coming through a man [or woman] who is on fire."²⁰

Genesis, Dr. Brueggemann has reminded us in his Genesis commentary, is the story of God calling worlds into being, man and woman into being, the community of faith into being.²¹ Here, where authentic being first begins to find definition, is a word for our age, and for us preachers, as God calls us into being as well.

As the inimitable Frederick Buechner imagines it, borrowing the language of Genesis 1:

Darkness was upon the face of the deep, and God said, "Let there be light." Darkness laps at my sleeping face like a tide, and God says, "Let there be Buechner." Why not? Out of the primeval chaos of sleep he calls me to be a life again. Waking into the new day, we are all of us Adam on the morning of creation, and the world is ours to name.²²

15. Richard Wills, *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Image of God* (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2009), 139.

16. Colossians 1.5.

17. Taylor, "Preaching into the Next Millennium," 30.

18. John 12.21 KJV.

19. Taylor, 30.

20. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1971), 97.

21. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 1.

22. Frederick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), 21–22.

Dr. Lloyd-Jones spoke for a host of postmoderns, and not a few others:

I can forgive the preacher almost anything if he gives me a sense of God, if he gives me something for my soul, if he gives me the sense that, though he is inadequate himself, he is handling something which is very great and very glorious, if he gives me some dim glimpse of the majesty and the glory of God, the love of Christ my Savior, and the magnificence of the Gospel. If he does that I am his debtor, and I am profoundly grateful to him.²³

Authenticity. Probably not a line you want to insert in your resume, but surely something we should pray for as an unspoken mark of the formation of Christ in us. And a human yearning best understood as a reflection of the *imago dei* in us, and in our neighbor.

Toward a Biblical Theology of Work in our Preaching (Stewardship)

It is impossible to calculate how long the current economic conditions will last, and if they might worsen, but that landscape is certainly changing, and with it the prospects of so many of our sisters and brothers today, and perhaps for generations to come. Unemployment is a curse. It is a profoundly dehumanizing thing, to have no work. I think a recalibration of our assumptions about work and business is in order, and again Genesis serves us powerfully.

Genesis 1.28; 2.1–3; 2.15. One of the great themes in Genesis is the role of work and vocation in the divine order—we were created for stewardship. In the Beginning, there was Work, work for humans to do—it was a vital aspect of what’s been called “the ideal human ecosystem” described in Genesis 1–2. Work is good, crucial to the experience of our humanity, and one of the chief ways we “image” our Creator.

“On the seventh day, God had finished his work” (Gen 2.2). Work must be a noble thing, if it’s something God does—and God does “good” work, if he does say so himself (and he does, six times!). And when God finishes his creation (for the time being, at least; there will be re-creation yet to do), he “rests.” For all time, the Creator models a value for our protection from the damages of overwork, to facilitate the reknitting of mind and body: the Sabbath.

Genesis 2 soon circles back to consider again God’s purposes for us. Verses 8–9 read: “Now the Lord God planted a garden in the east of Eden [“Eden,” meaning “pleasure, delight”] and there he put the human he had formed. And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food.” It is a garden of sumptuous delights—aesthetic splendor, ample nourishment—a paradise soon to include a loving partner, and a divine purpose—called stewardship: “The Lord God took the human and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Gen 2.15).

As far as the ancients were concerned, this was an extraordinary, even radical, view of work.²⁴ (It did not occur to most pagans to locate work in paradise.) In the twelfth century BCE Babylonian creation myth the *Enuma Elish*, Marduk becomes chief among the gods after a bloody victory over his rival Tiamat. He dismembers her body and from it creates the heavens and earth, then puts the losers—all those gods who foolishly sided with Tiamat—to work caring for this new creation called Earth. In time the weary loser-gods appeal to Marduk, “Please, we are gods! This ‘work’ is beneath us!” and so Marduk relents and graciously decrees, “I will create a lowly, primitive creature—we’ll call it ‘man,’ and he’ll be charged with the work of keeping Earth, so the gods may take their ease.”

I will take blood and fashion bone.
I will establish a savage, “man” shall be his name.
Truly, savage-man I will create.
He shall be charged with the service of the gods
That they might be at ease!²⁵

23. Lloyd-Jones, 98.

24. Primary resource for this section: Timothy Keller, “Made For Stewardship” (sermon).

25. *Enuma Elish*, Book 6, lines 5–8, trans. E. A. Speiser, in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed., ed. James Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 1969).

This is quite a different take on our origins, and on our work.

Work doesn't fare much better in some of our Western myths. Some versions of the ancient Pandora myth say that included among the plagues and evils released into the world when she ill-advisedly opened her box—it was actually a jar—was work, toil.

The Hebrew account in stark contrast says—God the Almighty (the God who created us in his image) *works*—he gets his hands dirty, this Gardener God. Then he *rests* from his work (because clearly he knew we might not have the good sense to do so). And then he put us in his garden to work it—to be sub-gardeners, you might say.

Timothy Keller, a most helpful resource on this theme, points out that here in our texts of Creation, *work* exists before the fall. It's an essential ingredient in a perfect human ecosystem—in a place of breathtaking beauty, delicious food and conjugal bliss. It's not in Pandora's jar! And thus work is to be included high on the list of God's "good" things—a thing of dignity, something to be valued and respected wherever we find it. This too, will preach.

(An aside: In light of this, we might want to counsel a reconsideration of some of the popular attitudes toward work and workers that we're tempted to consider beneath us. Such as we hear in the standard punch line where it's the loser who asks, "You want fries with that?" Our Master, after all, did appear to take his place proudly among "the help," and alongside all other service-industry personnel: "I am among you as one who serves," he said.²⁶)

There is so much frustration and confusion today about work—where to find it, certainly, but as well, how it should be done, and the place it occupies in our lives. I am fascinated by the current "Occupation" of Wall Street and similar grassroots protests against corporate greed and the abuse of power in Big Business, now spreading to other major cities (Nashville) in the Americas as well as Europe and Asia. Whatever we may think of the politics of the protestors, what we're seeing is a cry raised against work and a work ethic that has become broken, chaotic, fallen.

A book I'll recommend to you is Jeff Van Duzer's *Why Business Matters to God* (2010). He is dean of the School of Business at Seattle Pacific University, not a biblical scholar but very marketplace-savvy and theologically astute. Van Duzer affirms, "Business today operates after the Fall, and this is critical to our development of a theology of business. It would be worse than naïve to think that all we need to do is realign our purpose for business with the creation mandate, and try harder. Everything is broken and a far deeper fix is needed."²⁷

He's right. There are no quick fixes, that's for sure. But somebody needs to be articulating the creation mandate, and that's where we come in. The current "brokenness" presents us with a golden opportunity for the re-consideration of a model for work and vocation built around the Creation theme of stewardship. Tim Keller at Redeemer Presbyterian fellowship in New York City continues to draw huge numbers of young urban professionals, in no small part because he regularly preaches on the theme of a biblical theology of work. It begins with the notion of sacred trust: "Be fruitful. Fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion [rule, reign] over every living creature" (Gen 1.28). Some will hear the language of exploitation and unbridled consumerism here. But here's how Rick Marrs explains the biblical intent:

Created in the image of the reigning monarch of the universe clearly implies that humans are vice-regents ("princes and princesses")! Such a metaphor is heady stuff, especially when coupled with the language of rule and dominion. However, before we overdose on power, we must remember the vision of "rule/ dominion" [is] given us by God. Consistently throughout the Old Testament, God demonstrates genuine rulership. To "subdue" the earth does *not* carry [the] negative connotations of a despotic tyrant devastating the countryside, but envisions dominion as reflected in God's own treatment of his creation. The images that dominate God's rulership are that of a shepherd tending sheep or a parent caring for a child.²⁸

26. Luke 22.27.

27. Jeff Van Duzer, *Why Business Matters to God (And What Still Needs to Be Fixed)* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 56.

28. Rick R. Marrs, *Embracing the Call of God* (Webb City, MO: Covenant Publishing, 2003), 31–32.

In our work, as in all things, we are invited to “image” the Creator. We “image” the divine ruler in the way we rule. How does the ruler rule? Lovingly. Faithfully. Justly. Equitably. What does the faithful steward do? He, she, cares for—safeguards, defends, tends—what his or her master loves. Here then is a new way—for most of us, anyway—of imagining the work we do: We are tending the Garden of God. (Good work if you can get it.)

Tolkien, who fashioned a mythical world of his own, full of hobbits, orcs, ents and the like, coined a term to capture the capacity the Creator gives us to “image” his creativity. Tolkien called humans “sub-creators”²⁹—beings uniquely gifted to borrow what God created *ex nihilo*, and then allowed by grace to participate in his ongoing creation of beauty, order and goodness.

Artists, poets, musicians, innovators—we label these as the “creative” ones, but they’re hardly the only ones. Dr. Donald Hebb, the “father of neuropsychology” and a leading expert in brain function, said, “Creativity is not something that occurs only in the brain of outstanding individuals. It is a normal aspect of human brain function... Every human being is creative all the time.”³⁰

There are countless ways to join God’s work of bringing order from chaos, be it “ordering” an office (yes, management!), or “ordering” a student’s disorderly logic. Tending to a chaotic body, or a chaotic heart. Administering a modest garden or an endangered environment. Styling an unruly head of hair or an unruly congregation. Making an engine hum again. Making a house a home.

Thus may we know the joy of fruitfulness, and revel in our Creator’s goodness, not by “lording over” his creation but by joining in the tending of it, showing our love for the One who made it, and knowing his pleasure in entrusting it to us. Ron Highfield amplifies it this way: “God is the wellspring from which flows all good things in profligate abundance. Infinite in goodness, God wills that there be creatures with whom to share in his goodness. Above all his other creatures he gives us power to become wellsprings of goodness for other creatures.”³¹

Work is a good thing, then, even a holy thing. But praise God, it was never intended to be the measure of our value as human beings. “My salary,” a Manhattan bond trader once told me, “is how I keep score on whether my life is a success or not.” Remember Harold Abrahams, the haunted, driven, world-class sprinter in *Chariots of Fire*? He described the 100-meter dash as “ten seconds to justify my existence.”

How do you escape the crushing burden of personal value measured by the bottom line? How do you avoid the slavery of overwork? How do you find release from the bondage to your career, or to your professional ambition and ego, or for that matter, to your perceived need to earn your salvation? Creation says, in a word, “rest” (*Shabbat*)—the rest that allows us do our work with dignity, meaning and joy—the rest modeled for our sakes by the Creator himself. But more, the rest ultimately accomplished by the finished work of God through Jesus Christ our Lord: “There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God...[through him who, having offered] for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God” (Heb 4.9; 10.12).

The marketplace of the future is looking like a pretty scary place right now.

What would be more relevant and compelling to those in it or entering it, than a well-considered biblical theology of Business, built upon the Stewardship Model from Genesis?

From Story to Song in our Preaching

It is well documented how, some forty years ago, preaching discovered Story. The great Fred Craddock schooled us in “inductive movement.”³² Eugene Lowry unveiled the possibilities of the “homiletical plot,”³³ and David Buttrick showed us some “moves.”³⁴ They and others beckoned us away from points to story, or as Cornelius Plantinga Jr. put it, “from proposition to pilgrimage.”³⁵

29. J. R. R. Tolkien, “Mythopoeia” in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1988), 97–101.

30. Cited in Cheryl Forbes, *Imagination: Embracing a Theology of Wonder*, (Portland: Multnomah, 1986), 93.

31. Ron Highfield, *Great Is the Lord: Theology for the Praise of God* (Grand Rapids, IL: Eerdmans, 2008), chapter 6.

32. Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971).

33. Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980).

34. David Buttrick, *Homiletic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

35. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., “Dancing the Edge of Mystery: The new homiletics celebrates pilgrimage, not proposition,” *Books & Culture* (Sept-Oct 1999): 16–19.

I have long loved Clyde Fant's little parable about how, once upon a time in the land of preaching, there was great unrest among the churchgoers over all the "points" in sermons. Until one day, right in middle of the sermon, a woman stood up and yelled, "I hate points!" The preachers in desperation fled to the homileticians in their ivory towers, crying "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" The homileticians conferred and came back with this wisdom: "Stories! Fill your sermons with stories, and your people will love you again." And it was so—for a season. Until their sermons, like skyscrapers, came to be nothing but one story upon another. Until one day, right in the middle of the sermon, that same woman stood up and yelled, "But what's the point?"³⁶

The points, at least those truths and propositions that belong in Paul's category of things passed on in preaching which are *en protois*—"first things"³⁷—those points were crucial, and still are. Faith without content is a phantom. I think it was Alexander Campbell who said, "It is not in chewing that we are nourished, but in chewing food."

But preaching needed some fresh new paths, and the Story served us well. And it will continue to do so (as long as there is an occasional discernable point in there somewhere). Because life is narrative, and what experience of Truth is more compelling than that of being caught up into the narrative of salvation history: "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but Yahweh brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand."³⁸

But Tom Long and others whom I respect have in recent days suggested that today's seekers after truth don't share quite the same fascination with narrative with the generation before, and we may have run inductive preaching right into the ground with an overabundance of trivial or gratuitous sermon stories that were often unworthy of the gospel. "The giddy season of narrative preaching is coming to an end," says Dr. Long, "and good riddance."³⁹

So where next? As I look around, and ahead, I can't help but notice how important music has increasingly become in so many of the churches experiencing revitalized worship. Is there any denying the power of almighty music in popular culture today? Of course that's hardly new—music has been in us and among us from our very beginnings; and that may explain why it touches us in our deepest places.

But music's omnipresence in our lives today is unprecedented, and downright magical. For \$250 you can own the iPod Classic (sixth generation) with a capacity for 40,000 songs—or as they advertise it, "a lifetime of entertainment in your pocket," "no tune left behind." I don't know how music can become much more present in our life experience, unless they come up with an Apple cochlear implant. (I'll bet Steve Jobs thought of that, too.)

Nancy and I have been greatly affected—greatly blessed—by the worship we join in most Sunday evenings, at the Ethos Church, an inner-city Church of Christ planted in downtown Nashville in 2008. Rich, fervent congregational singing, led most Sundays by Will Shinnick, in combination with the potent expository preaching of young Dave Clayton, suggest to me the promise of good things to come.

Now if I have any discernment of the movement of God afoot, I think I may be seeing it more and more in the emerging new potentials of music—the music attendant to our preaching (as integrated into the overall worship experience), but more, the music *within* our preaching. I'm not pleading for preacherly solos in the sermon (God forbid). I'm suggesting that some of the most compelling and self-authenticating preaching we do in the future may be that which listens carefully to, and taps into, the music of scripture. That music definitely will preach.

Here's where I'm going with this. Genesis 1, it turns out, is a *song*—a transcendent song—"a poetic narrative likely formed for liturgical usage," says Dr. Brueggemann.⁴⁰ This is the world's Opening Hymn, the first Call to Worship—rich with repetition, in a distinct lyrical structure. "And God said..." "And God said..." "And God said..." Eight times. "Let there be...and there was..." "Let there be...and there was." And of

36. A paraphrase of a story found in Clyde E. Fant, *Preaching For Today* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 191–92, 203.

37. 1 Corinthians 15.3.

38. Deuteronomy 6.21.

39. Thomas G. Long, *Preaching From Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 25.

40. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 22.

course, the glorious chorus, sounded again and again: “And God saw that it was good,” and the crowning verdict, “it was very good.” The Bible opens in song—a song of blessing, the original doxology. Creation truly is our first glimpse of grace!

In C. S. Lewis’ *The Magician’s Nephew*, all is dark and empty, until a song breaks the silence, stars appear, the sun rises and Narnia is born. The great golden lion—the Christ figure—has breathed life into a brand new world, singing all the while.

This is a song that needs more airtime. Stephen Hawking says that the question Science cannot answer is this: “Why does the universe bother to exist?”⁴¹ The lyrics of our Opening Hymn say that the universe bothers to exist because of a song born in the heart of God. We are not the result of an “accidental collocation of atoms” (Bertrand Russell), but of a loving divine gift. And history is not random happenstance, but chock-full of the providences of a redemptive Creator—our origins, we sing, are located more in the eternal *Logos* than in the primordial ooze.

And there is such tenderness in these lyrics. “The Spirit of God was hovering over the deep” (Gen 1.2). Like a mother bird over her future family—wings fully extended, warming the eggs to hatch, or guarding the newborns from danger, or even teaching them to fly.

And there is such celebration in the chorus. “It is good!” Which tells us, among other things, the Maker enjoys his work! Dr. Brueggemann says this “goodness” is not primarily moral, but aesthetic, and might better be translated “lovely, pleasing, beautiful.”⁴² As we might say after a cold drink, or a fine movie, or a satisfying meal, or making love: “*That was good.*” Our highest joys are found in the experience of the goodness of God.

This is a great Song! One that claims, “This is my Father’s world... All nature sings, and ‘round me rings the music of the spheres... He shines in all that’s fair.”⁴³ Moreover, this is great theology, right at the heart of a sound doctrine of Creation. Act One, Scene One: All creation’s singing. Join in the chorus! I tell you, this will preach today.

Lloyd John Ogilvie was chaplain of the United States Senate for four terms (1995–2003). Dr. Ogilvie and I had mutual friends at Pepperdine, so when I was preparing to move there from the D.C. area, he graciously invited me to his office for coffee and a blessing. The blessing came in the form of a story he told me that day (later published). He told me of when he went to study New Testament at New College, Edinburgh, under the great Scotsman James Stewart.

When I arrived at New College, I fully accepted that Christ had died for my sins and that through the power of the resurrection I would live forever. [But] inside I was much the same powerless person [I’d always been.] My theological orthodoxy had pinned me to the mat of self-generated piety. I was hammer-locked by the idea that my status with God was dependent on my performance.

I had the words but not the music. I was occupied with my studies about Christ, but had no personal relationship with him.

Ogilvie began a series of conversations with James Stewart about this almost obsessive fear that, as a minister and as a believer, he could never be good enough to earn God’s love. Until one day, he said, Stewart “looked me squarely in the eye, grasped my coat lapels and [said, ‘Lloyd, listen to me,] You are loved now!’” Ogilvie said those “four liberating words of grace” broke through all that powerless-ness, self-generated piety and performance anxiety. For the first time, and from that day on, he had the music. Or better yet, the music had him.⁴⁴ May it be so with you and me.

41. Stephen W. Hawking, “Origin of the Universe” (published speech, 1988).

42. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 37.

43. Maltbie Babcock, “This is My Father’s World” (1901), in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 144.

44. Lloyd John Ogilvie, “The Scholar-Preacher as Exemplified by James S. Stewart” (personal manuscript).

Heading for Home (Thoughts in Closing)

I don't believe for a minute that we're seeing the death of preaching, although sometimes, as Barbara Brown Taylor says, "it is hard to tell the death throes from the labor pains."⁴⁵ Of this I am pretty sure—preaching will not become less important in the "dangerous" days ahead. I forget when it was that Al Gore invented the Internet, but someone declared early on in the Digital Age, that no matter how dependent we may come to be on high tech, there will always be the need for a counterbalancing "high touch." It's how we're wired, us humans, and my experience tells me that's true. Whatever those new Sunday sanctuaries may turn out to be in twenty years or so, I believe people will continue to yearn for and seek out one another's physical presence, will continue to yearn for and seek out a Word from God borne along on the actual (not virtual) voice of another. Whether that will take the shape of three points and a poem, or seven bullet points and a YouTube video, or some heretofore unimagined template, there will be some sermon form, and Lord willing, some sermon substance, in the midst of "the assembly." The appetite for an authentic encounter with God and with his Word—and with one another—is stronger today than I have ever known it.

And that presents a special opportunity and challenge for those of us who preach, one that will always be pastoral in nature. As I've revisited the Creation material in recent weeks in preparation for today, I've been struck with how pastoral the language seems, how attuned to our deepest human needs, how *right* for a time of national recalibration amidst great economic nervousness and diminished political expectations.

And "the Lord God formed the human from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living being" (Gen 2.7). This Creator whose Spirit first "hovered" over the deep—like some great mother-to-be, resolute in purpose and fierce in protectiveness—"formed" us. We weren't "materialized," we were "formed." The Creator's M.O. has always been a "hands-on" business—shaping, molding, fashioning us with such loving care and intention, into handcrafted images of himself. And when we drew first breath, it was the Creator's breath—birthing us, Derek Kidner says, "with the face-to-face intimacy of a kiss."⁴⁶

So may I say in closing, whatever homiletical trajectories we and God decide upon in the coming days, we mustn't neglect the pastoral component of our preaching—the regular, personal, hands-on care of brother and sister, neighbor and outsider—without which our preaching can never be fully formed or informed. Without which our authenticity will always be in question.

I confess my puzzlement and frustration whenever I hear of preachers who "don't do pastoral"—in order, I suppose, that their preaching will not suffer. I think I know that struggle, trying to balance the many needs of family, self and congregation with the determination to prepare the best possible sermons every Sunday. But I think our sermons *do* suffer when they're not the product of the consistent engagement of the Living Word with the living church, community and world. So I beg you, don't be just a preacher—be a pastoring preacher, (or if you prefer) a preaching pastor. Our people, our communities, need us alongside them. As our brother Lynn Anderson has long counseled us, we need to smell like our sheep.⁴⁷

"See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness, and streams in the wasteland" (Isa 43.19).

What new thing is God going to do next? I don't know, but I'm eager to find out! This much is sure: the Creator may have rested, but he has never stopped creating. Our God is the God of perpetual newness. What is it Chesterton said? "We have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we."

But think of it. In a world where pop cultural "newness" has a shorter shelf life than ever before, you and I are called to be—implausibly—heralds of the only "newness" that lasts forever: new-world-makers, rank amateur "sub-creators" handling the stuff of heaven. No wonder Paul, as he works out his theology of "new creation" in 2 Corinthians, comes to a screeching halt in mid-metaphor as he catches a glimpse of the sheer audacity of preaching, and wonders out loud, "Who is equal to such a task?"⁴⁸

45. Taylor, "Preaching into the Next Millennium," 27.

46. Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 60.

47. Lynn Anderson, *They Smell Like Sheep: Spiritual Leadership for the 21st Century* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 1997).

48. 2 Corinthians 2.16.

As we prayerfully seek new and more effective homiletical trajectories, let us resolve that we will place any and all innovations on the altar of the eternal-yet-ever-new purposes of God and his Holy Spirit. As Anthony Robinson put it so well, “It is not the church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission that has a church in the world... God is on the move and the church is always catching up with him. We join his mission.”⁴⁹

We may be “jars of clay,” but our Gospel is a “treasure” beyond compare.⁵⁰ Our task may be audacious, but our material is spectacular! Including these magnificent Creation texts—so authentically human (and humanizing), so vocationally instructive and hopeful, so rich with kingdom music. These are our birth narratives—without which we cannot begin to hear our New Birth narratives. They persuade us of our value and dignity. They introduce us to our Abba. They light the way to Jesus. This stuff will preach, like gangbusters.

N. T. Wright closes his book *Simply Christian* with a Creation vision for all followers of Jesus, but I hear it as a word especially for those of us who have heard and submitted to the call to preach:

New creation has already begun, the sun has begun to rise. Christians are called to leave behind in the tomb of Jesus Christ, all that belongs to the brokenness and incompleteness of the present world. It is time in the power of the Spirit, to take up our proper role, our fully human role, as agents, heralds and stewards of the new day that is dawning. That, quite simply, is what it means to be Christian. To follow Jesus Christ into the new world, God’s new world, which he has thrown open before us.⁵¹

God bless you in your good work.

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49. Anthony B. Robinson, Review of Craig Van Gelder, ed., *The Missional Church and Denominations: Helping Congregations Develop a Missional Identity*, Christian Century, (January 12, 2010), 40.

50. 2 Corinthians 4.7.

51. N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 237.