

One New Book for the Preacher

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THE INTRUSIVE WORD: PREACHING TO THE UNBAPTIZED by William H. Willimon. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, 1994.

After twenty years of thinking of preaching as my attempt to close the gap, I now conceive of preaching, faithful evangelical preaching as opening the gap. For it is in the gaps, the great big frightening, invigorating gaps, that we can wonder, reenvision, reform, be reborn. When preachers try to fill all the gaps with our suggestions for better living, our solutions to the world's problems, there is no space left for God to come and save us. God must have room.

William Willimon

In 1971, a homiletical tremor shook our pulpits—sermon notes flew into the pews, choir members blinked their eyes, and congregations soon heard a more personal tone from their ministers. Fred Craddock's book *As One Without Authority*, published almost twenty-five years ago, redirected the route many of us took from text to pulpit. Craddock wrote, "Why not re-create with the congregation [the preacher's] inductive experience of coming to an understanding of the message of the text." And so the door to the preacher's study opened and out shuffled our confessional stories about grappling with the text. That open door led in many ways to the recent preoccupation with narrative preaching and the topical sermon.

Today, William Willimon, Dean of the Chapel and Professor of Christian Ministry at Duke University, believes that tremor cracked a bearing wall. In his latest book, *The Intrusive Word: Preaching to the Unbaptized*, he suggests:

Inductive preaching, too much so-called narrative preaching in which I "share my story," a great deal of liberation preaching in which I am urged to "theologize from my experience of oppression," and much psychologized preaching in which I am told that the gospel is some sort of psychic solution to something that ailed me before I came to church—all assume that I am already equipped to hear and to receive the gospel just as I am. No. I must be trained to hear the gospel, to ask the right questions for which it is the answer.

Like a prophet set loose in the temple, Willimon sweeps all current homiletical trends into the corner and proclaims our primary task is not to connect with our congregations, but to connect them with God. Only God can convert and transform—not human insight. The preacher does not share his or her story, but rather shares "intrusive news that evokes a new set of practices, a complex of habits, a way of living in the world, discipleship." He reminds, "Preaching in the service of anything less than a living, intrusive God...is not worth the effort."

In other words, preachers should not strive to take soundings of the emotional

condition and needs of the congregation and craft sermons from these insights. The foundation of the sermon does not rest on our sensitivity or even the creativity of the preacher, rather the foundation of the sermon rests with an intrusive God. He writes, "Some of my most unfaithful preaching arose in that moment when, after studying the biblical text, I asked myself, 'So what?'"

I know some will read Willimon's observations, nod their heads and mumble, "Of course," but for others—those with a newspaper in one hand and a Bible in the other—such a thesis hits right between the ribs. Must we cancel our subscriptions to *Newsweek* and read only the *Journal of Biblical Literature*? If I have any quibble with *The Intrusive Word*, sometimes it feels Willimon pulls the pendulum of homiletical perspective too far to one side. For any effective preacher strives to allow an intrusive God to speak, but she also seeks to discover the weekly pulse of the congregation. To ignore the human condition of the congregation in the sermon—suffering, joy, disappointment—is to walk the path of the prophet and not the priest. Willimon in no way advocates that the preacher ignore pastoral insight and wisdom, but my own experience suggests a faithful preacher allows sermons to fluctuate between "top down" and "bottom up." What Willimon has done effectively however is remind us our task is not to steal the spotlight from the text with clever insights of the human condition. As Barth, (who would have loved this book!) says, "I have the impression that my sermons interest my audience most when...I allow my language to be shaped...as much as possible by what the text seems to be saying."

If you are browsing for a new tool to drop into your homiletical tool chest, this book will disappoint. As you can see, *The Intrusive Word* is not about rhetorical flourishes, or any type of pastoral plastic surgery. Ostensibly, this book is about evangelism and preaching to the unbaptized, but I wonder when Willimon sat knee deep in notes if he discovered a topic larger than his original thesis. Although he includes his usual exemplary sermons—which could be described as "evangelistic"—he really strives for an approach towards preaching beyond evangelism. He writes, "Thus I have not been able, in this book, finally to decide whether or not we are most concerned with preaching to the baptized or with preaching to the unbaptized. Perhaps the choice is a false case of either/or." Exactly.

What Willimon offers is a slim book that creates its own homiletical tremor: we feel those rumblings when *The Intrusive Word* asks if we are struck anew by the power of God and if we boldly tell the story of the good news of Jesus Christ to those who have heard and those who have not. Our pulpits tremble when it suggests when we are faithful to the intrusive quality of God we and our churches will be "born again." He writes, "the attempt to evangelize others enables us to be continually evangelized." And that's exactly what I would guess an intrusive God desires. For I imagine if we were to follow where Willimon is leading, we might once again be startled to find our sermon notes blown from the pulpit, and the eyes of a few choir members blink—but this time because they have come into the presence of the Word of God and don't quite understand, and don't quite know what to do. And maybe, suggests Willimon, that's what it means to train our congregation to ask the right questions...and to give God room to answer.