

Preaching the Terrors

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Not too long ago, I was invited to address a senior citizens' group on "Women in the Old Testament." They had been studying various biblical characters and wanted me to introduce them to some of Israel's heroines, so I did. I told them about Jael, "most blessed of all women," (Judges 5:24) who drove a tent peg through Sisera's temple with a mallet. I told them about Judith, who seduced Holofernes and then paused to pray — "Give me strength today, O Lord God of Israel!" — before plunging his own sword into his neck (Judith 13:7). I told them about Esther, who won permission for the Jews of her husband's Persian empire "to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate" 75,000 of their enemies (Esther 8:11). By the end of my talk, my audience's eyes were very large and I was feeling a little queasy myself. They thanked me very much and have never asked me back.

Now granted, I could just as easily have talked about Sarah, Ruth, and the widow of Zarephath, but there comes a time in every preacher's life when the queasy-making parts of the Bible can no longer be ignored, when it is time to admit that the Bible is not a book about admirable people or even about a conventionally admirable God. It is instead a book about a sovereign God's covenant with a chosen people, as full of holy terrors as it is of holy wonders, none of which we may avoid without avoiding part of the truth.

On the whole, we do not do so well with the terror part. It does not fit the image of God we wish to publish; it goes against the good news we want to proclaim. In these days of dwindling numbers, who is eager to remind the congregation how the prophet Elisha cursed a crowd of jeering boys in the name of the Lord and how two she-bears trundled obediently out of the woods to maul forty-two of them (2 Kings 2:23-25)? Or how Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead for withholding a portion of their cash from the early Christian community (Acts 5:1-11)?

Fortunately, or unfortunately, there is little reason to tangle with such peripheral texts of terror when we have much more central texts readily at hand. In the Old Testament, God asks Abraham to roast his only son; in the New Testament, God's will puts another only son on a cross. In these two worst-case scenarios and all their derivatives, the issue for us remains the same: how do we preach a loving God who does such unloving things? How do we preach the terrors?

In practice, we tend to preach them by making them less terrible. Of course God sent a ram to take Isaac's place at the last moment, we say; of course God raised Jesus from the dead and made him Lord of all. Thus the first story becomes one about how obedience results in rescue and the second one a story about how obedience results in resurrection, but what is lost while such morals are being made is the very real terror of obeying God without the least idea how things will turn out in the end — which is, after all, the human situation. Things will turn out according to God's will, certainly, and in faith we confess that to be enough for us; but insofar as God's will is so radically different from our own, there is plenty of room for terror in our lives.

Every preacher has his or her own canon of terror. My own includes three kinds of texts. First, those in which God sanctions violence — killing every firstborn in the

land of Egypt (Exodus 11:5) or ordering Saul to slaughter the Amalekites down to the last woman, child, and donkey (1 Samuel 15:3). Second, those in which God aims to separate me from my stuff -- suggesting that I surrender my last handful of meal (1 Kings 17:12) or sell all that I own to follow (Mark 10:21). And third, those texts in which God exercises final judgment — refusing to open the door to the foolish bridesmaids (Matthew 25:12) or banishing the ill-clad wedding guest to outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 22:13).

They are terrible to me because they expose my vulnerability. If God can condemn Amalekite babies for the sins of their parents, then there is no hope for me. Nor can I find safety in following Jesus, if selling all that I own is the way. So of course I will find myself on the wrong side of the door when the time comes, hearing my muffled sentence pronounced through the latch: “Truly, I tell you, I do not know you.” These are terrible texts because they remind me how helpless I am, how frail and not in charge I am. While there are clearly things I can do to improve my life and things I can do to cheapen it, my fate is ultimately out of my hands. I cannot control God’s disposition toward me, and that is terrifying.

One way to hide from such knowledge is to take refuge in righteousness, suggesting that those who behave properly are terror-exempt. Obey God and avoid the sword. Give generously and prevent misfortune. Be good sheep and dodge the outer darkness. Congregations are relieved to hear sermons like these and preachers are glad to preach them because they offer some leverage in an otherwise frightening universe, but they finally fail to meet the test either of human experience or biblical witness. Job stands on one side of the pulpit shaking his head and Jesus on the other, both of them confirming our fear that righteousness does nothing to dissuade God from trying the faithful by fire and by ice.

That, finally, is what makes a text terrible to me — not what it exposes about me but what it exposes about God — a sovereign God who is radically different from me, whose mind I cannot read, whose decisions I cannot predict, whose actions I cannot control. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God,” writes the author of the letter to the Hebrews (10:31), but it is not as if we had a choice. That is whose hands we are in; our only choice is how we will handle our fear.

As preachers we have an additional choice, and that is how we will address the fear of those who listen to us. Jonathan Edwards, the great eighteenth century American revivalist, was one of the most frightening preachers of all time. In his book *Thoughts on the Revival of Religion in New England*, he rose to the defense of those who were being blamed for “speaking terror to them that are already under great terrors.” It was, he said, a matter of saving those who were drowning in full sight of land.

A person that sees himself ready to sink into hell is ready to strive, some way or other, to lay God under some obligation to him; but he is to be beat off from everything of that nature, though it greatly increases his terror to see himself wholly destitute, on every side, of any refuge, or any thing of his own to lay hold of; as a man that sees himself in danger of drowning is in terror and endeavors to catch hold on every twig within his reach, and he that pulls away those twigs from him increases his terror; yet if they are insufficient to save him, and by being in his way prevent his looking to that which will save him, to pull them away is necessary to save his life....¹

It is an alarming image, and yet it is what texts of terror do. They pry our fingers away from our own ideas about who God should be and how God should act so that there are only two things left for us to do with our fear; use it to propel us toward the God who is, or let it sink us like a stone. Preaching texts of terror calls for the same kind of choice. We may try to protect ourselves and our congregations from them by tossing out inflatable bits of comfort and advice, or we may find the courage to forsake those twigs and swim for our lives toward the living God. As fearful as that may be, it is finally less fearful than the alternative.

In a paradoxical way, texts of terror carry their own consolation inside of them. Several nights ago a friend and I watched Laurence Olivier in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Neither of us had ever seen the play before, so we were unprepared for the relentless tragedy of it, with fathers rejecting children, children betraying parents, brothers plotting against brothers and sisters poisoning sisters. By the end of the last scene, the stage was littered with bodies — Lear, Cordelia, Goneril, Regan, Edmund — all dead. As the lights went down and the credits rolled, my friend turned to me with tears in his eyes and said, "What could be more wonderful than that?"

When I asked him to explain himself he could not, except to say that he recognized his own life in the play, and that it helped him somehow to see his worst fears acted out. It was real — that was the best he could do — and it was redemptive for him to witness real pain suffered in a way that seemed true to him. In the same way, I believe, texts of terror are recognizable to us. Judgment, violence, rejection, death — they are all present in our world if not in our lives and there is some crazy kind of consolation in the fact that they are present in the Bible as well. They remind us that the Bible is not all lambs and rainbows. If it were, it would not be our book. Our book has everything in it — wonder and terrors, worst fears and best hopes — both for ourselves and our relationship with God. The best hope of all is that because the terrors are included here, as part of the covenant story, they may turn out to be redemptive in the end, when we see dimly no more but face to face at last.

That is the fundamental hope all texts of terror drive us to: that however wrong they may seem to us, however misbegotten and needlessly cruel, God may yet be present in them, working redemption in ways we are not equipped to discern. Our fear of God's method may turn out to be like our fear of the surgeon's knife, which must wound before it can heal. While we would prefer to forego the pain altogether — or at the very least to perform our own surgery, thank you very much — our survival of the terrors depends on our trust in the surgeon's skill. If we believe the one to whom we surrender ourselves is competent, then all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

If we are open to this possibility in our interpretation of the scripture, then we open the possibility of its being true in the interpretation of our lives as well. Whether the terror is heard on Sunday or lived on Monday, the hermeneutical question remains the same: do we trust God to act in all the events of our lives, or only in the ones that meet with our approval?

Several summers ago I spent three days on a barrier island where loggerhead turtles were laying their eggs. One night while the tide was out, I watched a huge female heave herself up the beach to dig her nest and empty herself into it while slow, salt tears ran from her eyes. Afraid of disturbing her, I left before she had finished her work but returned next morning to see if I could find the spot where her eggs lay hidden in the sand. What I found were her tracks, only they led in the wrong direction. Instead of heading back out to sea, she had wandered into the dunes, which were

already hot as asphalt in the morning sun.

A little ways inland I found her, exhausted and all but baked, her head and flippers caked with dried sand. After pouring water on her and covering her with sea oats, I fetched a park ranger who returned with a jeep to rescue her. As I watched in horror, he flipped her over on her back, wrapped tire chains around her front legs, and hooked the chains to the trailer hitch on his jeep. Then he took off, yanking her body forward so fast that her open mouth filled with sand and then disappeared underneath her as her neck bent so far I feared it would break.

The ranger hauled her over the dunes and down onto the beach; I followed the path that the prow of her shell cut in the sand. At ocean's edge, he unhooked her and turned her right side up again. She lay motionless in the surf as the water lapped at her body, washing the sand from her eyes and making her skin shine again. Then a particularly large wave broke over her and she lifted her head slightly, moving her back legs as she did. As I watched, she revived. Every fresh wave brought her life back to her until one of them made her light enough to find a foothold and push off, back into water that was her home. Watching her swim slowly away and remembering her nightmare ride through the dunes, I noted that it is sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down.

Our hope, through all our own terrors, is that we are being saved. To hope this does not mean we lie down before the terrors, however. For as long as we have strength to fight, it is both our nature and our privilege to do so. Sometimes God's blessing does not come until daybreak, after a full night of wrestling angels, and sometimes it takes much longer than that. As preachers and as believers, it is our job to struggle with the terrors, refusing to let go of them until they have yielded their blessings.

The common lectionary's readings for Lent give us ample opportunity to explore both our struggle and our salvation. During the five weeks of Lent, the Old Testament lessons rehearse the history of God's covenant with humankind, beginning with the recital of that history in Deuteronomy 26 and continuing with God's promises to Abraham, Moses, Joshua, and Isaiah. These solid stories of relationship give us the ballast we need to survive the stormy blast of the gospel lessons, which begin with Christ's severe testing in the wilderness before moving on to our own. "Lord," someone asks him in the lection for week two, "will only a few be saved?" (Luke 13:22). His answer is a stern yes, which he repeats in week three. "Unless you repent you will all perish just as they did" (Luke 13:5).

Lent is the season to confront such terrifying news, not by buckling before it but by using its harsh light to examine the truth of our situation before God. It is a season to see through all our illusions about what will save us and to know for certain what will not. To use Jonathan Edwards' image, it is a time to abandon the twigs we have been using to keep us afloat and to reach out for the only raft that can bear our weight. Because the good news means to change us, we inevitably hear it as bad news first. Is that harsh light really necessary? Couldn't I hang on to one medium-sized branch and sort of dog paddle my way to shore? The gospel's answers this Lent are, respectively, yes and no. God does not mean to improve us but to save us, even if it scares us to death.

In week four, the story of the prodigal son shows us how it is done. Cashing in his relationship with his father, he journeys to a far country where he loses all his twigs — money, pleasure, independence, adventure — none of them keeps him afloat and soon he is floundering for his life, swimming back toward the shore of his father's

embrace. He is dead when he arrives, but his father's love revives him. He was lost, and is found. The terrors do not overcome him but they scare him to death, death that his father's open arms turn back into life.

In week five, death is no longer figurative but actual fact. Jesus visits the home of Lazarus, whom he has raised from the dead, and there Mary anoints him for his own burial. His death is inevitable, which is the chief terror of the gospel. Here is the best man God ever made, who has done nothing but right all his life, and what is his reward? Not ripe old age with grandchildren hanging on his sleeves but early, violent death on a cross. This death ruins all our efforts to turn the Bible into a manual for The Good Life. No one who has heard the story of Jesus Christ can mistake where following him will lead, which makes the gospel itself a text of terror for all who wish to avoid suffering and death. The good news of God in Christ is heard loudest and best by those who stand on the far side of fresh grave.

On Palm Sunday we go through Luke's account of Christ's death in excruciating detail, as we will go through it again with John on Good Friday, but in between those two tombstones death recedes, looming above the narratives of Holy Week like a vulture in a tree. Meanwhile, Jesus enters Jerusalem to settle his affairs, speaking to the crowd for the last time and then withdrawing with his disciples, to instruct them and wash their feet.

All but one of the gospel lessons for Holy Week are from John, which means that Jesus moves toward his death with a strong, prescient confidence. His life is not taken from him; he gives it willingly. If he is terrified, it does not show. Of all human beings, he is the most able to wade into the bloody darkness alone, trusting that he will not be alone forever or for long. In the background, the Old Testament lessons play the servant songs of Isaiah, reminding us that suffering has always been the vocation of God's chosen ones.

On Good Friday there is no escape. The vultures are perched low now; friends have vanished and the enemy is everywhere. The only good news is that there is one man who does not dissemble, one man who continues to speak the truth although it brings all the empires of this world crashing down on his head. According to John, Jesus does not give up his ghost until he knows that "It is finished" (19:30). Whether or not he knows what happens next, he knows that he is part of something beyond himself, something he has brought to fullness by surrendering himself to it as to the incalculable, incomparable will of God.

In faith, we believe that the terrors of Lent and of our lives are purifying terrors, confounding clauses in a covenant we may nonetheless trust. While they are washing all our certainties away, it is hard to believe they may also be cleansing us of our illusions, but that is the dare. If we are tempted to draw back from it and seek an easier way, we are not alone. The world is full of former disciples. "Do you also wish to go away?" Jesus asks the handful who are left him in the sixth chapter of John (6:67). "Lord," Simon Peter answers him, "to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

NOTE

¹ Richard Lischer, ed., *Theories of Preaching* (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1987), 102.