

Are We Having Fun Yet?

The Possibilities of Preaching in an Age of Boredom

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“Are we having fun yet?” This familiar incantation hangs heavy over us, more a dare than a question. The casual ease of the expression glazes over the abyss that yawns beneath it. For our fixation on “fun” is inversely proportional to the depth of our boredom.

Yes, boredom. Not one of the sexier expressions of the malaise of our postmodern Western world but one of the deadliest. It is the sinkhole that sucks up the tattered remnants of creativity, energy, vision, and imagination bequeathed to us by the playing out of that complex of traditions we call “modernity.”¹

John F. Alexander, in his book *The Secular Squeeze: Recovering Christian Depth in a Shallow World*², suggestively lifts up boredom as the chief symptom of the plight of humankind in late twentieth century North America. He argues that the real power of secularism in our society is that it has rendered our lives monochromatic. All the *pneuma* (“breath,” “spirit”) has been squeezed out of us. We can no longer discern any difference between Rembrandt and Andy Warhol.

Modernity, according to Alexander, has played itself out along four lines. First, the rise of technocratic rationalism honed our reason to (mostly) discover and value those things that we can see, touch, hear, count, and pile up. The heights and depths of human existence, its beauties and its horrors fall outside the constricted boundaries of our conception of reason. The result: humanity is dichotomized and culture hollowed out.

Romanticism, the second strand of modernity, strove mightily to reinvest life and culture with *pneuma*. Reacting against technocratic reason romanticism highlighted human freedom, feeling, and choice in the face of a highly impersonal and implacable world.

Romanticism was itself parasitic, however, on the very reason it critiqued and thus lacked the suppleness and texture of a genuine alternative. It too was monochromatic, lacking both an adequate foundation as well as the means for discernment among the welter of choices and options available to us.

The church has aided and abetted in the hollowing out of our society too. According to Alexander, churches “rarely tell the story of Jesus straight. Instead, they tell versions of modernity. They preach Jesus in odd combinations with secularism and romanticism, materialism and nationalism....Except for certain outward forms, churches...are often hard to tell from the surrounding culture. They have exchanged the gospel for a culturally acceptable cross of gold.”³

With hollowness all around, all that remains is us. Gasping for *pneuma*, we focus on ourselves. Narcissism (both individual and cultural) is the final strand in the tapestry of modernity. The problem is, of course, that we are empty as well. “You can imagine what happens when you try to fill something hollow with itself. After much contortion and pain, it just disappears. The resulting implosion is quite colorful as it destroys itself and everything around itself.”⁴

Exhausted and with nowhere else to turn we are left with boredom, a monochromatic existence full of things to do but with few things really worth doing. This boredom differs significantly from the much discussed *ennui* of a previous generation. Coming out of existentialism that type of boredom was both individualistic and hopeful. There was a way out for everyone. Each of us could choose to embrace authentic existence thus banishing the specter of *ennui*.

A generation later we face boredom with a very different face. It is now corporate and cosmic. Not just my life, but “life” itself appears devoid of *pneuma*. And there’s no longer much hope. None of the stories we hear offers much solace. Philosophy, history, literature, and religion have all been deconstructed. Andy Warhol is as good (or better!) than Rembrandt. So modernity gives way to postmodernity with a histrionic yawn.

And that brings us to Beavis and Butthead, MTV’s embodiment of the boredom endemic to our postmodern Western culture.⁵ Contrary to first impressions, this undynamic duo of antisocial adolescents are anything but radical flouters of the status quo. Indeed they are among its major apologists. No one escapes the boredom of our time if Beavis and Butthead have anything to say about it!

Anyone who stands out from everyone else, dares to be different, or engages in random acts of kindness or celebrations of beauty; anyone who seems, in other words, to have some *pneuma*, is shot down with the terse pronouncement, “That sucks.” Any story that might call us out of our boredom and into a risky and venturesome mode of life receives the critical review, “That sucks.” Any commitments, passions, or priorities that entail genuine openness to others (or the Other) would, surely, receive the same appraisal.

Yes, Beavis and Butthead embody the boredom of our age. They tell us, “what you see is what you get. So don’t look for anything else! Embrace mediocrity. Revel in your boredom!” They are apologists *par excellence* for the ordinary and bring the arsenal of MTV’s sophisticated technology to contest any temptations we have to the extraordinary. As Tom Long puts it, “The crime of ‘Beavis and Butthead’ is not that it is antisocial but that it is so blandly and cynically bourgeois.”⁶

“Are we having fun yet?” Not by a long shot!

How do we preach to a world and a church in a time like ours? What praxis of preaching can form and inform preachers for challenging the pervasive boredom we face? Can we sketch an anatomy of proclamation that illumines both the text and context with which we work?

I believe we can. What follows are some suggestions about what such an anatomy of proclamation might look like. They are intended to be provocative and suggestive, not final or exhaustive. They represent the insights I have gained while reflecting on my own preaching. My hope is that these suggestions will help other preachers better reflect on their own work.

Preaching in our age, in the first place, needs to be perspectival. Increasingly it is evident that the struggle of our time is a conflict of stories—a conflict about the adequacy and cogency of the perspectives that vie for our loyalty and shape our priorities, passions, and practices. We saw above one sketch of “modernity,” whose story has been the dominant one in our history. The gospel must be proclaimed in such a way that contests the primacy of modernity’s story in the church and, at the same time, sketches a vision for the world of the adventure we call “the Kingdom of God.”

Important here is recognition of the reality that modernity's story is almost as influential in the church as it is in the world. Preaching must contest the presence and power of this alien narrative in the midst of God's people. We continually have to clarify, distinguish, and commend the contours and lineaments of the biblical story in order that our people mature in their ability to identify and root out the other stories that seek to shape us.⁷

The connections between specific issues, particular texts, and the framework of the Bible's account of God's presence and purposes in human history must be carefully drawn. Failure to do this accounts, I believe, for the point of truth in the widely expressed concern about the church's "biblical illiteracy." Our people no longer know how to read their story in the light of God's story and thus to derive from it a clear and compelling sense of identity and mission.⁸

An episode from C. S. Lewis's children's story, *The Silver Chair*,⁹ demonstrates the nature of the conflict we are in as preachers of the gospel and the power of stories to shape us.¹⁰ The great lion Aslan (the Christ figure) sends Jill Pole and Eustace Scrubb from our world to Narnia on a mission to rescue the enchanted Prince Rilian from his charms-induced service to the Queen of the Underworld and return to his proper vocation as King of the Overland.

Along the way Jill and Eustace pick up several Narnian companions, chief among them Puddleglum, a Marshwiggle. They finally reach Prince Rilian, free him, and attempt to escape.

The Queen intercepts them however. She plies all her charms and enchantments to persuade the rescue party that her Underworld is all there really is. There is no Overworld, she insists, except in their dreams. No sun, no Aslan, no Narnia. With the party under her spell and on the verge of capitulating, the Marshwiggle, Puddleglum, acts boldly. He walks to the fire on which the Queen had sprinkled her enchanting powder and stamps it out. Since Marshwiggle's wear no shoes, Puddleglum's action cost him a considerable amount of pain. It also cleared his mind of the story the Queen had been weaving. His response merits full quotation:

"One word, Ma'am," he said, coming back from the fire; limping because of the pain. "All you've said is quite right, I shouldn't wonder. I'm a chap who likes to know the worst and put the best face I can on it. So I won't deny any of what you've said. There's one thing more to be said, even so. Suppose we have only dreamed or made up all those things—trees and grass, sun and moon, and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours is the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that's a funny thing, when you come to think of it. We're just babies making up a game, if you're right. But four babies playing a game can make a play world which licks your real world hollow. That's why I'm going to stand by the play world. I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to be as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia. So, thanking you kindly for your supper, if these two gentlemen and the young lady are ready, we're leaving your court at once and setting out in the dark to spend our lives looking for the Overland. Not that I think our lives will be very long, I should think; but that's a small loss if the world's as dull a place as you say."¹¹

Now that's perspectival preaching at its best!

Further, preaching in our time, at its best, will be pentecostal. This second aspect of our anatomy of proclamation stresses the radically selfless quality of Christian existence. From its source to its goal, Christian preaching lives on borrowed resources. In dependence on God's Spirit our words are not our own nor are our visions and vistas for mission. We are caught up in something bigger than ourselves, whose nature and scope lend focus and meaning to our lives.

Preaching which takes seriously its origin in the Pentecost event will also and of necessity be missional¹² in orientation. For the North American church this means a thoroughgoing reorientation of its life. We must not only learn to accept but also to give thanks for our disestablishment and marginalization from the putative sources of power in our society. This marginalization and the consequent minority status it entails for the church opens up scary and yet exciting new horizons for preaching and ministry.

Preaching that aids in the creation and implementation of new forms of ministry will be exilic preaching. it will encourage us to recognize and seek out other exiles (those who faithfully live out a minority identity and lifestyle) and learn from them how to read the larger culture in which we are embedded and nurture an identity and spirituality for the long haul.

In my former congregation I helped develop a partner relationship with an inner-city African American Presbyterian church. One of our first events was a joint Bible study in which we looked at a variety of passages relating to racial issues and talked together about them. I will never forget the amazement/consternation many of my folks felt afterwards as they reflected on the passion with which our African American brothers and sisters sought to find a "black" presence in the biblical story. As we talked I suggested that perhaps people whose identity is not affirmed and nurtured by the larger culture have a lively and vital stake in finding themselves in the scriptures. I further commented that maybe those of us who are the larger culture also need to discover a "black" presence in the scriptures to shake our assumption that the people in the Bible are just like us and to more intentionally seek out and embrace a transforming sense of identity as God's people.

Learnings from those engaged in what we have called "mission work" can be most instructive as well. Though so much of the history of this mission work has been naive, triumphalistic, and imperialistic, there have been some exemplars who have shown solidarity, sensitivity, and humility in their efforts to understand and communicate with people different from themselves. From these exemplars we can learn how to read a culture different from our own as well as skills in communicating across those differences. I believe that embodying and imparting these kinds of skills are exciting and critical tasks of exilic preaching in the "foreign" land of postmodern America. Perhaps we will find ourselves and our preaching caught up in a new Pentecost as we open ourselves to God and the world in new ways!

Paradoxical is the third feature of an anatomy of proclamation in times like ours that we need to consider. Walter Brueggemann has characterized the Jewish piety we find in the Psalms (and elsewhere) as an odd juxtaposition of utter realism and extravagant hope.¹³ At the nexus of this juxtaposition lies the paradox of preaching about which I am speaking.

A key challenge for preaching today lies in articulating and living this paradox in

a biblical fashion. In our mainline churches we seldom suffer from either utter realism or extravagant hope. Instead we take refuge in ideological platitudes (of both the left and the right) or blind hope unrelated to the realities around us. Seemingly, we are unable to look beyond our ideologies and still maintain hope. The paradox of biblical preaching stretches us in both directions--deepening to the point of acute pain our perceptions of what's really happening around us and in us and, at the same time, finding hope, extravagantly implausible hope, to be a Christian's characteristic and integral response to such realism.

Looking reality square in the face and not succumbing to either cynicism or despair is a gracious gift rooted in the largeness of our God's heart. For God takes in the agony of the full measure of our rebellion and its horrific consequences at every level of existence, the divine heart rent to the breaking point. Such divine "realism" however, generates redemptive love which lays hold of such reality and heedless of the cost, reclaims and renews it. All this is to say that genuinely paradoxical preaching will be cruciform preaching.

The malaise of boredom described earlier can only take root in a church devoid of paradoxical/cruciform preaching. When our preaching fails to put us in touch with the reality of the world around us (which none of us wants to look at very badly!) our hope becomes disembodied or wholly futuristic, losing its capacity to shape in the image of the One who "did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us" (Rom. 8:32) and by whose sovereign love "creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). Such hope is justifiably ignored as a viable response to the boredom which afflicts us.

On the other hand, preaching which fails to discern redemptive power and purpose in the midst of reality often ends up flagellating people into cynicism and, sometimes, despair by its very efforts to unflinchingly describe what's really going on. For who among us can deal with even the local manifestations of our national problems without facing the temptation to give in, give up, and get out?

Cruciform preaching, however, holds firmly to the paradox of both utter realism and extravagant hope in ways that reflect theological integrity and which grasp us at primal levels as well. Such preaching identifies our points of deepest pain and beckons us to discover there the resources to resist the tentacles of cynicism and despair, to live in genuine hope and encounter the living God.¹⁴

Advent 1994 dawns on a North America bored into cynicism and apathy by a massive failure of our cultural and religious traditions to nurture and care for our corporate soul. Advent 1994 dawns on a church in North America which, far from contending with such boredom and articulating alternative resources for renewal, has all too often been its co-conspirator and midwife.

Advent itself, however, compels us to think through a response to such boredom. For Advent asks, in the most compelling way possible, about the perspective by which we understand and order our lives. Advent also requires us to reassess our lives and our work by the grand images of healing and salvation toward which God's mission in our world is moving. And finally, Advent asks about the truth of the world we live in and intimates the peculiar shape of God's own love in that kind of world.

Move over, Beavis and Butthead, Jesus is coming! Are we having fun yet? You bet your life!

NOTES

¹ See Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: The Free Press, 1990) for an acute portrayal of the dynamics of "modernity."

² John F. Alexander, *The Secular Squeeze: Recovering Christian Depth in a Shallow World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

³ Alexander, *The Secular Squeeze*, 17-18.

⁴ Alexander, *The Secular Squeeze*, 18.

⁵ For the next few paragraphs I depend on the perceptive analysis of Thomas G. Long in his editorial, "Beavis and Butthead Get Saved," *Theology Today*, 51 (July 1994): 199-203.

⁶ Long, "Beavis and Butthead Get Saved," 203.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann makes a similar point when, in his *Power, Providence and Personality: Biblical Insight into Life and Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), he writes that "a major enterprise in our contemporary situation is to reimagine life away from old configurations of power to new public possibilities" (p. 111).

⁸ My focus on "story" and "narrative" draws on the work of people like Stanley Hauerwas, William Willimon, Hans Frei, and George Lindbeck.

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York: Collier Books, 1953), 136-162.

¹⁰ The recognition that we are indeed in a conflict, a battle, might give us pause to reconsider the non-use of hymns which draw on martial images (e.g., "Onward, Christian Soldiers"). Though these hymns have been and can be used improperly, they do call attention to the conflicted character of Christian existence which, I would argue, is the chief image used in the New Testament to delineate the nature of discipleship. It might be worth a second look at ways to frame and utilize these hymns in the proper worship of God.

¹¹ Lewis, *The Silver Chair*, 158-159.

¹² The "Gospel and Our Culture Network," which has been active in North America since 1987, is an important focal point of various efforts to find ways to move the church in our country to a more missional orientation. For more information on the network, contact Dr. George Hunsberger at Western Theological Seminary, 101 E. 13th St., Holland, MI 49423-3622. Also worthy of note are the perspective and study materials of the Center for Parish Development, 5407 South University Ave., Chicago, IL 60615.

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1984), 98.

¹⁴ Across a broader panorama the work of Jacques Ellul reflects this paradoxical character of Christian reflection. His work as a historian of institutions and sociologist generates an unflinching view of humankind under the thrall of "technique," "propaganda," and "illusion" which offer little basis for hope. Yet his theological work, always rooted in the realism of his other work, continually discerns signs of hope and the transforming presence of Jesus Christ. Whether one agrees with Ellul at every point or not does not detract from the importance of the way he does his theologizing.