

Douglas John Hall and Gerard Manley Hopkins

By Way Of Illustration

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So much creative and groundbreaking work has been done by Douglas John Hall on stewardship that I don't want to trivialize it by seeing connections in the way we preachers select illustrations for our sermons. I had just finished reading his article in the *Journal for Preachers*, "Stewardship as a Missional Discipline."¹ On the same day, on *The News Hour With Jim Lehrer*, poet laureate Robert Pinsky read Gerald Manley Hopkin's poem, "God's Grandeur." By some odd stretch of the imagination, I began making quirky connections to the good and bad ways that we pastors select illustrations for use in our sermons.

Hall, doing exciting theological work on stewardship, turns the usual meaning of stewardship upside down. Normally, stewardship is the November drive that raises money for our mission. The mission is the thing. Stewardship becomes instrumental to it. The mission can be anything from world evangelism to social Gospel. However defined, mission needs money, and stewardship sermons and teachings are the means to that end. The illustrations will be about generous giving, tithing, faithful people giving to expand Christ's work in the world or whatever. Even the sacrifice of Christ can be presented as the model for all sacrifice, whether giving our life or giving money. The illustrations of whatever kind are designed to touch the heart, which in turn will open the wallet.

Hall asks, "Suppose that the aim of God is more than mission work as defined by our institutional programs?" When church programs aim only at saving individuals or even at making society Christian, that can be a limited goal. Particularly is this so if we unconsciously allow the word "Christian" in such a sentence to become a synonym for "Western." At that point, God is placed pretty much under the shadow of a Gothic arch.

It would be better to speak of the mission of God toward the world, rather than the mission of the church. Then, we might use the mind-expanding phrases of Ephesians 1-3:

(God) let us in on the plans he took such delight in making.
He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything
would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest
heaven, everything on planet earth. (1:10, Peterson trans.)

That phrasing has a bigger sound than that of any one church program. It avoids narrowing the Gospel to what might appear in a denominational magazine. For unwittingly, as soon as we talk about church programs conceived by lay leaders and clergy, we start assuming that we can construct a Christian world that is over against the everyday world. It suggests that should we be successful, and raise enough money to do the job, we would end up constructing a religious alternative to the world that may not have all the tasty juices of the actual world. At that point, many illustrations used

in stewardship sermons, to say nothing of those used during the church year, start to have an otherworldly, anemic sound.

For Hall, the aim of the Gospel is not to lay an institutional church or even a Christian society alongside the secular world. It is not to leave open the possibility that the secular world might be fuller, more embracing, and far more interesting than the imagined results should all church programs succeed admirably. Rather, God's mission is to bring life to the entire creation. In the beginning, the Spirit brooded over the unformed darkness of the universe. If so, the sermon should be identifying life in existing and wide-ranging incipient forms.

It follows that illustrations in sermons do the Gospel a favor when they identify life, see it in all provinces of civilization, and develop the vocabulary which ties a biblical promise to a harbinger of that promise. Hopefully, the preachers as well as the congregation become part of a strange transformation. They are not any more involved in merely a stewardship drive, but become stewards themselves, stewards not only of church programs but rather of all parts of creation in which they function. Stewards in this sense are responsible to their Creator Owner, God. They are also 'stewards of the mystery,' responsible for their Creator's property. Using 'steward' in this all-embracing way, Hall suggests, has an added benefit. It gives Christians something in common with the 'splendid pagans' who may not feel any particular allegiance to an Owner, but who are deeply concerned about the 'property,' which is shared on all continents by the human race.²

Leaving that to one side, consider some lines of Hopkins. This Roman Catholic poet died over a century ago. He is religious, but not in any narrow sense. His rhythms are not iambic pentameter, and the alliterations and contrasts he uses butt up against each other; they are not smoothed out. They have meaning, and yet are full of suggestive ambiguity. Pinsky, for instance, finds in the poem the force of spirituality and the sublime in images of the industrial revolution — sheet metal and factories, oil crushed between metal parts, even the brown cloud of smog over the smokestacks of an industrial landscape. Yet the result is a psalm of praise for a God of size:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; Bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.³

This is certainly not the stereotyped "three points and a poem" sermon. It is

religious language that breaks out of the sanctuary pattern and goes wide ranging to detect life-giving movements of the Spirit, surprises in the world God created and broods over. Robert Pinsky, our nation's poet laureate, read the poem at Thanksgiving for the television audience, then asked the question, "Can we find corresponding images of freshness to be thankful for, freshness, deep down things like the computer monitor, or the super highway full of mini-vans? If so, nearing the turn of another century, that is something to be thankful for."

But what does all this have to do with sermon illustration?

Let me affirm that a sermon should grow out of a Bible text. The meaning of the text for the congregation is what is important. Illustrations, if used, are servants of that message. However, a sermon may not need illustrations. As Craddock says, "If it (the sermon) possessed unity of thought, movement towards its goal, and language lively and imaginative, parishioners may speak of the sermon's illustrations when, in fact, there were none."⁴ Yet, where used, illustrations should have overtones that acknowledge ultimate purpose is all embracing. They should be big in the Hall/Hopkins sense. God's mission is to give life to the world. We are stewards of that mystery. Through the illustrations we use, we have the opportunity to witness to a world touched to life by God. God through our preaching still broods in hope over the darkness within and without. Despite human sin, Christ's cross and resurrection, the essence of the Gospel we proclaim brings this world again and again from death to life.

By way of illustration, consider certain biblical passages. Whether they need further illustration beyond some orderly presentation, unified and vividly worded, is up to the preacher. However, we will assume that an illustration is wanted. In each case, we will also work on the principle that Grady Davis noted years ago, that illustrations function best when they move the thought from the general to the specific, as if to say, "Here's the sort of thing I'm talking about."⁵ Even with these assumptions, some illustrations stay within an accepted fabric of Christian ideas. They are "safe," and may be helpful, but other illustrations function in a wider worldview. Their use brings with them a wider set of connotations. We will continually opt for the latter.

Text A – John 4:1-15, Jesus talks to the Samaritan woman at the well.

The meaning shuttles back and forth between water from the well and water from the deeper spring. The water of salvation, brought by Jesus, vies with the prosaic meanings: well water, puddle water, rain barrel water. This distinction, though, is not clearly perceived by the woman. The woman knows something is offered that is real, and she is intrigued by Jesus. But she has no exact knowledge of who Jesus is. No statement of Nicene orthodoxy is given. Is Jesus "greater than our father" "a prophet"? the "messiah"? Yet, her half-knowledge doesn't prevent her witness, which is encouraging for all of us.

Let us pick one suggestion in the story. Thirst is a central feature, and thirst is real whether physical or spiritual. It is also real in our modern acquisitive society. Inner cravings seem to burn out of control. In our day, that thirst must be addressed. One way to present the Gospel is to claim, and perhaps illustrate, that there is an inner spring of water and that some have found it. For instance, C. S. Lewis would be of that number, "surprised by joy" during a London bus ride.⁶ But, so too, would Morrie Schwartz, a professor at Brandeis University who talks about the meaning of life.⁷ He is in his last weeks, dying of Lew Gehrig's disease. He has found the secret that love and loving

relationships with friends and family have no substitute. He is nourished by this conviction. I prefer to use Morrie's story rather than draw from the more acceptable stories of Christian conversion.

This story, which is told in the best seller, *Tuesdays With Morrie*, should not upstage the primary story, the woman at the well. However, Morrie is what a modern person sporting inner nourishment might look like. His testimony also raises a provocative question that can be dealt with in some other sermon, of how a "splendid pagan" with no conscious orthodox commitment to Jesus can still seem to have tapped the hidden spring. Does Jesus often travel the road to Sychar? Perhaps he draws up to other wells incognito, and offers the healing stream. Morrie seems to run on that kind of refreshment.

Text B — Psalm 84:6, A psalmist longs "for the courts of the Lord."

The psalmist believes that those "in whose heart are the highways to Zion" are blessed and happy. In fact, verse 6 makes the claim that when these people go through the Valley of Baca (barren places, dry spots, wilderness) they *make it* a place of springs. Two kinds of illustration come to mind. One is the testimony of saints who rejoice even in their afflictions. Samuel Rutherford would qualify. When imprisoned, he testified "God was in my cell last night, and every stone glowed like a ruby." Paul in the Philippian jail would be another. However, consider Kathleen Norris' testimony.⁸ She describes taking her seat in an airplane. She is desperately tired from a lack of sleep, hoping to catch up on a long plane ride. Then she discovers she is assigned a seat next to a compulsive talker — a boy of eighteen who wants to be older and savvier, but who has a noticeable developmental problem. He consumes the flight with endless chatter. He is Norris' Valley of Baca.

Kathleen Norris is a hybrid Christian — a freethinking Presbyterian who is nourished in Benedictine monasteries. Her conversation with the young man is not religious but caring. She recognizes this interruption of her weariness as a divine intervention, and hopes she can live up to what has been asked of her. What does he need? Remembering her sister Becky, who was brain damaged at birth, helps her to respond. What would Becky need? A listening ear? Assurance? Someone to run interference by being a friend?

The young man expresses his fears while thumbing through the plane's magazines, looking nervously about, and absorbing the strange sounds. Ms. Norris explains in advance what choices he will have to make when the stewardess brings the food cart, what sounds happen after takeoff and before landing, the grinding up and then down of the landing gear. She encourages him to look for land when they descend through the mist. When she finally delivers him to an anxious and grateful family at the gate, she notes, "And off I went, to the rest of my day, still tired but feeling oddly refreshed." Psalm 84:6 was happening again, of finding springs in a valley of dryness. The setting is common, non-religious to the average eye, deeply religious to the eye that may see the 'Holy Ghost brooding' over the creation.

Text C — Matthew 24:36-46, The aftermath of Jesus' teaching on the apocalypse.

The normal question of the disciples, "When will this be," is rejected in favor of a concluding parable urging us to keep doing faithfully what we are supposed to do.

The end of our century will no doubt bring apocalyptic imagery front and center.

Some of that imagery describes a world holocaust, as the language of Jesus suggests in Matthew 24. Other imagery is of indescribable transformations, as in Isaiah 11 or Revelation 21. The question of “when” will also intrude. The great divide in American Protestantism shows up clearly over the questions of New World thinking. Is Jesus talking about a happening that is right now on the horizon, perhaps in the year 2000, which He will bring to pass in a cataclysmic event? Does it involve a Second Coming and a “New Jerusalem” coming down from above? Or, is it a gradual transformation of our existing world that will complete the plan God had in the beginning, and which he is even now working through in Jesus Christ and his disciples? In either case, it is God’s plan and God’s power that will accomplish the future. This is true no matter on which side of the great divide you happen to be. However, I opt for seeing transformations in this world. I want to be God’s responsible steward, rather than another of God’s speculators, reveling in end-time thinking. The question, then, is how to illustrate my option in a helpful way. The answer is, in Joel’s Pentecostal words, “to dream dreams and see visions.”

Dreams of a New World are not vaporous nonsense. They kindle hope and particularly, steadfastness. This is the punch line of Matthew 24:45-46 – not heightened curiosity but heightened determination to be faithful. To this end, the image that Kurt Vonnegut gave us years ago would do. He pictured bombers flying in reverse, sucking back all the bullets they triggered, having all the bombs they carried disassembled, their elements returned to the earth.¹⁰ His was a crazy modern dream of swords beat into plowshares. More recent are the dreams of Buechner and Norris; each visualizes a trip to a New York City that for a few moments is transformed into the City of God.¹¹ This old prayer of St. Augustine is even better in that it hones in on Matthew 24:46.

Let us sing alleluia here on earth, while we still live in anxiety, so that we may sing it one day in heaven in full security... We shall have no enemies in heaven, we shall never lose a friend. God’s praises are sung both there and here, but here they are sung in anxiety, there in security; here they are sung by those destined to die, there, by those destined to live forever; here they are sung in hope, there in hope’s fulfillment; here, they are sung by wayfarers, there, by those living in their own country. So then... let us sing now, not in order to enjoy a life of leisure, but in order to lighten our labors. You should sing as wayfarers do – sing, but continue your journey... Sing then, but keep going.¹²

Hall’s theology and Hopkins’ poem both sing of the fullness and interpenetrating of our world by God, and give us permission to imagine, theologize, and keep on with the journey.

Notes

¹ John Douglas Hall, “Stewardship as A Missional Discipline,” *Journal for Preachers* (Advent, 1998): 19-27.

² A term first used by Augustine.

³ “God’s Grandeur,” *Modern Religious Poems*, ed. Jacob Trapp (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 22.

⁴ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 204.

⁵ H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 242-252.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1955).

⁷ Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie* (New York: Doubleday, 1998). See especially his critique of materialism, 123-128.

⁸ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1998). 361-364.

⁹ Norris, 364.

¹⁰ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children's Crusade: A Duty Dance with Death* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1969).

¹¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Clown in the Belfry* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 161-168; Kathleen Norris, 382-4.

¹² Norris, 368.