

Protagonist Corner

Tuning the Trumpet

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If the trumpet gives forth an uncertain sound, who will prepare for the battle? (I Corinthians 14:8)

Major problems in church and society today may well stem from the diminution of the preaching office, usually brought about by preachers ourselves. Too often we are tempted to abandon the discipline and laborious aspects of our calling for lesser tasks, and to abdicate the authority of the pulpit. Although the turning of the calendar from 1999 to 2000 may mean little in itself, preachers today do have unparalleled opportunities for proclamation, despite the cacophony of voices and conflicting values and visions to which congregations and we listen.

This “protagonist” recognizes that it may seem absurd to believe that what we do in our worship together can move people for Christ’s sake, when they also listen to hours of advertising, go to the cinema often, become numbed by the barrage of bad news from the cable, desperately surf the net for many purposes, and find much more manic stimulation in the stadium or concert hall than in the sanctuary. Preaching, though, has always been entrusted to fools who know what the “powers” are, yet are not intimidated by them. Preaching is ultimately grounded in the Word and not our words, and that alone is our reason for confidence. People who knew George Buttrick relate that once he was approached by a former student who was finding preaching to be unrewarding and the congregation unresponsive. Buttrick cagily inquired, “Well, surely you do not expect exhausted, scientifically oriented moderns to take seriously anything you say in a few minutes on a Sunday morning?” “No, I guess not,” came the reply. “That’s precisely the problem!” retorted Buttrick.

People today are expressing a hunger for and openness to the Gospel. For example, during the parched summer of 1999 in Atlanta, Bishop T.D. Jakes held a series of services at the Georgia Dome which broke all attendance records for that facility. At one of these occasions, more than 80,000 people were present — more than for Billy Graham, more than for the Falcons. The point is not to agree with Jakes’ theology or to bless his marketing skills, or to become depressed that the throngs do not come to hear you and me, but simply to say that many people are ready and willing to hear the Word. The persistent presence on best-seller lists of books such as Mitch Albom’s *Tuesdays with Morrie* bespeaks a yearning for koinonia and for engagement with ultimate questions which do not go away. Even in the mainline Presbyterian Church, participation in national youth conferences (which feature a heavy dose of sermons) has more than doubled during the last decade. Every weekend in sunny, secular Florida, more people attend worship services somewhere than attend collegiate and professional sporting events.

But what is offered so often is an uncertain sound. In her Beecher Lectures at Yale, Barbara Brown Taylor related a dismal experience:

I listened to an Easter sermon once in which the preacher stood up in front of a church full of people hungry for good news and told us Easter bunny jokes, one after another. He never met our eyes. He looked up at the light fixtures as he delivered his punch lines, never noticing how we laughed less each time. Finally he said something about how Easter was God's joke on death and we should all laugh more. Then he said Amen and sat down. I have never in my life wished so badly for pulpit police. I wanted someone with a badge to go up and arrest that guy, slap some handcuffs on him, and lead him away. . . But there is no one to stop us, you see.¹

In season and out of season (see II Timothy 4:1-5), congregations have every right to expect that a preacher will enter the pulpit with no less preparation and focus and competence and reliability than a mechanic replacing a head gasket, an attorney going before a judge, an accountant filling out a return, a physician conducting an endoscopic examination, an athlete engaging in the World Cup (or at least the preliminaries), a chef readying a feast, a musician playing a part in a major symphony, or a sanitation worker hauling away and properly disposing of the garbage.

One of the great gifts of the church is that preachers are dispersed widely. I recall twenty years ago asking one of the then widely recognized giants of the pulpit where he went to hear good preaching. To my surprise, he mentioned the name of the pastor of a small congregation about thirty miles from any city, a pastor who never attained any fame or fortune as a homiletician, whose sermons have never been published or plagiarized but who diligently prepared each week. Carl Sandburg's poem, "Little Candle," illustrates the story and is also a good reminder during Advent:

Light may be had for nothing
Or the low cost of looking, seeing;
And the secrets of light come high.
Light knows more than it tells.
Does it happen the sun, the moon
Choose to be dazzling, baffling?
They do demand deep loyal communions.
So do the angles of moving stars.
So do the seven sprays of the rainbow.
So does any little candle
Speaking for itself in its personal corner.²

Many clergy ordained since the 1960's have been prone to give up or dilute the call to preach. Preaching easily lapses into something to be whined about, to be prepared when everything else is already addressed. Almost as in a soap opera, ministers have been enticed to become change agents who were going to impact systems, counselors to whose offices the distraught would flock for wisdom, urban enablers, fund-raisers, entertainers, recreation directors, or corporate managers. Some of these "functions" indeed may be worthy of commitment and energy, and not everyone has the same gifts; but the church will be unprepared for battle with the powers as long as the sound of preaching is uncertain.

Never before in the history of the church have there been so many resources,

ancient and modern, so readily available for preachers. With the internet and with speedy mail order book services, it is not even necessary to be near a theological library to become more fully acquainted with the breadth and depth of Christian scholarship. Dullness and ignorance in the pulpit are inexcusable. A love and reverence for Scripture, an interdisciplinary mentality and vocabulary, and a priority placed upon preaching which extends from before dawn until past midnight are needed as the century ends and a new one begins. For decades now Martin Luther has spoken to me and possibly to you:

Unless those who are in the office of preacher find joy in him who sent them, they will have much trouble. Our Lord God had to ask Moses as many as six times. He also led me into the office in the same way. Had I known about it beforehand, he would have had to take *more* pains to get me in. Be that as it may, now that I have begun, I intend to perform the duties of the office with his help. On account of the exceedingly great and heavy cares and worries connected with it, I would not take the whole world to enter upon this work now. On the other hand, when I regard him who called me, I would not take the whole world not to have begun it. Nor do I wish to have another God. (*Table Talk*, November, 1531)

Notes

1 Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God Is Silent* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1998), 22.

2 Carl Sandburg, *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 672.