

Preaching as an Art Form: An Advent Experiment

by James S. Lowry

Mount Pleasant Presbyterian Church, Mount Pleasant, S.C.

The purpose of this article is to suggest that writing for oral interpretation in general and writing for the proclamation of gospel in particular be claimed (or reclaimed) as a legitimate, distinct, and important art form. The article is written from the point of view of a parish preacher for whom Lord's Day worship comes with rapid regularity and for whom formal training, excellent and challenging though it was, is far removed in both time and space. There is no sense in which these suggestions are intended as advice of the "how-to" variety. Rather, in the tradition of other art forms, foundation material, basic principles and appreciation are assumed to be more important than technique in helping the artist develop her or his style. The article concludes with a sermon (chosen from year "A" of the lectionary), as an example of one preacher's Advent experimenting.

While these sketchy and somewhat preliminary thoughts have been developing over a number of years, they remain incomplete and require a great deal more thought and maturing. Nevertheless, for at least two reasons this is an appropriate time for an article espousing these ideas to appear in "A Journal for Preachers." First, recent work in biblical hermeneutics is now readily available to the week-in-week-out preacher. The material is emerging at a time when, though it is rarely identified as such, the historical and contemporary hermeneutics of the larger church (in all of its variety), the hermeneutics of a given congregation (in all of its variety), and the hermeneutics of the preacher are all readily identifiable, available, and useful. Weaving these four together for oral interpretation in the context of worship is more the task of an artist than it is the task of a technician or the task of a scholar, though technique and scholarship are necessary instruments of the artists' work.

Second, this article appears preparatory to Advent because there is no other season during which the hermeneutics of the Bible, the hermeneutics of the larger church, the hermeneutics of the particular congregation, and the hermeneutics of the preacher are likely to be more at odds with each other and thus they become the more observably distinct. For the same reason no season more than Advent is likely to require better art from preachers if there is to be a meeting of the four hermeneutics in our various acts of corporate worship.

To be more specific, in the area of biblical hermeneutics today's preachers have at their disposal a growing quantity of excellent material. We are living and working in a time when current scholarship is able to take advantage of the result of the critical (form, historical, redaction) approach to biblical studies. We are now discovering as a logical end of that approach (those approaches), that we are better able to interpret the Bible on its own terms. In

simplest terms, with knowledge of JEPD tucked under our belts as part of our presupposition we are freer, for example, to listen to the laughter of Sara when she is told at the age of 90 she will soon be pregnant; and, for further example, with an assumption of the one-time existence of the "Q" document (*et al*) we are freer to explore the theology of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. In that regard, the "style" of biblical study of Walter Brueggemann is a shining star on the horizon. In addition to his prolific writing, Professor Brueggemann has been quite generous with his time in conducting seminars around the country. One hopes he will be able to continue. James A. Sanders is another scholar who is working extensively on biblical hermeneutics (see especially *God has a Story Too, Sermons In Context*, Fortress, 1979). For preaching during Advent, of course, Raymond E. Brown's *The Birth of the Messiah* (Image Books of Doubleday, 1979) is an absolute must. The latter is a 594 page study of the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke including translation, notes (with extensive Old Testament references) and an especially helpful analysis of the theology of Matthew and Luke. These scholars are representative of a growing number who, while gratefully acknowledging the work of their predecessors in biblical criticism, now lead us in the next logical step, namely, to interpret the Bible on its own terms or on the basis of its own hermeneutics. That being so, the artist in the preacher can appreciate in fresh ways the biblical narrative as the foundation of her or his work (those who intend to preach during Advent and Christmastide and who do not own Brown's book should sell the steeple if necessary to buy it).

If interpreting the Bible on its own terms is the first step in claiming (re-claiming) preaching as art form, the second step is understanding the "official" hermeneutics of the larger church—especially as the larger church's hermeneutics may differ from the hermeneutics of the rank and file of those Christians who occupy pews on the Lord's Day. The purpose here is not to argue that one is more appropriate or "better" than the other but to suggest that in all instances they (ie. the "official" hermeneutics and the hermeneutics in the pew) exist; in many instances they are different, and in most instances they both have a positive contribution to make to the preacher as she or he approaches her or his art.

Taking Advent as a ready example, the larger church's official theological emphasis is the eager *anticipation* of the return of Christ (ie. "Come, thou long expected Jesus. . ."). From life's rawest war torn edges to its softest beds of crimson clover we eagerly await the advent of the Messiah to establish the kingdom of God on Earth as it is in Heaven. On the other hand, while not completely rejecting the former, most good Christian folk, either from some great need or from submission to advertising, emphasize Advent as a time to get ready for the celebration of the birthday of Jesus. If the two were completely divergent views they might be debated. Since they are not opposites, however, an artist is more likely to bring them together in a helpful way than is a technician or a scholar—though, once again, the technique and the scholarship are necessary tools of the art.

Having raised for examination the hermeneutics of the Bible, the hermeneutics of the church, and the hermeneutics of the Christians, the remaining

ingredient is the hermeneutics of the artist preacher. For all of its insidious aftermath, at least here the human potential movement has served the preacher well. Most of us, for better or worse, know "where-we're-coming-from" and most of us have some appreciation for "where-the-people-are-at." Such information can be of great value. Frederick Buechner, a literary artist of the first order, in his autobiographical material (especially *The Sacred Journey*, Harper and Row, 1982) helps us see the importance of one's autobiography to all of one's art. That is to say, having read Buechner's autobiography, one can then see his life story reflected in all of his material. The week-in-and-week-out preacher may, if she or he chooses, do as well. It will take an artist, however, to be able to use her or his hermeneutics in such a way that the use of autobiographical material does not become an end in itself. Once again, for most of us Advent is the season more than all others when autobiographical material is both vivid and plentiful. What better time to experiment with its artistic potential?

Perhaps for purposes in this journal it is best merely to raise the issue of preaching as art form and leave its resolution/s to the artists. To attempt anything like an artist's manual of procedures for preachers could easily become as sterile as painting by numbers or playing the organ with one finger and computerized harmony. There are, however, a growing number of helps available: Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot, The Sermon As Narrative Art Form* (John Knox, 1980); Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Abingdon, 1978); Edmund A. Steimle, Morris J. Niedenthal, and Charles L. Rice, *Preaching the Story* (Fortress, 1980); Frederick Buechner, especially *Telling the Truth, the Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale* (Harper and Row, 1977), *Peculiar Treasures* (Harper and Row, 1979), and *Wishful Thinking, A Theological ABC* (Harper and Row, 1973); and Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables, A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Fortress, 1975) and *Metaphorical Theology, Models of God in Religious Language* (Fortress, 1982). These are but a few suggestions. There are, no doubt, many more. The great thing here, however, is for the preacher to be able to think of herself or himself as an artist whose unique talent is in demand Lord's Day after Lord's Day.

In a recent interview on National Public Radio the brilliant pianist Andre Watts spoke of pianists whose technique may be perfect but whose music is colorless and uninteresting. On the other hand he spoke of pianists whose technique may be deplorable but whose music is alive and moving. According to Watts the pianist who is an artist is the one who can master both technique and expression. We all know preachers whose content is rich and full but whose expression is dull and uninteresting; and we all know a sad number of preachers who are gifted orators but who have little to say. We are well within the mark to conclude with Watts that when, for the preacher, content and expression come together the end result is art of the finest order—art used for the proclamation of the gospel.

Joseph Named Him Jesus

Matthew 1:18-25

The house smelled of shaving cream,
shampoo, and
sausage;
or maybe it was bacon.
Breakfast varies.
Shaving cream and shampoo are every day.

In the background
Donahue was on the "Today Show."
Donahue must be masochistic.
He likes to punish himself.
Donahue was interviewing Julian Bond
and the Imperial Wizard
of the Klu Klux Klan
all at the same time
and on the same stage.

Little wonder
against such a background symphony
of ranting and raving
it took three tries
to tie my tie.
On the third try I near hanged myself.
It was just then that the
Imperial Grand Wizard
(or whatever that grown man
calls himself)
announced,
as though it were among the truths
to be held self evident,
that, of course,
in order to be a member
of the Klu Klux Klan
you have to believe in Jesus Christ.

When we profess our faith in Jesus Christ
we take on some strange bedfellows.

Did you see in Friday's paper
where a group of Christians
from North Carolina
hanged Santa Claus in effigy?
Now every self-respecting Christian
wishes Christmas weren't so commercial,
but hanging anyone in effigy
in the name of Jesus Christ,

especially Santa,
does seem a bit much.

Then, of course
there are those who handle
poisonous snakes
in the name of Jesus Christ;

and those who peddle,
for fun and profit,
predictions of Jesus' return on TV.

The list of misunderstandings goes on:
Some great.
Some small.

It seems some of us
misunderstand Jesus all of the time.
But all of us
misunderstand Jesus some of the time.

When God decided to become a baby
he left himself open to misunderstanding.
The Baby,
so young and innocent,
it is easier, by far
to make him over in our image
than it is
to make ourselves over in his.

Never mind all that.
Misunderstanding or no,
every year we go back.
There is a magnetism
in the Bethlehem stable.
It draws us returning
to peek just once more.

Every year we must bring the baby
from the shadow of memory
like some dusty creche
from the attic;
and we hold the baby
in the light
of a wondrous winter star,
or if we fear to touch,
we have the baby held out
for us to see
from a distance.

How ever shall we believe that baby is God?

How dare we not?

How ever shall we understand
this God with dimples
and baby fat?
How can we misunderstand?

THE BABY'S NAME IS JESUS:

named, no doubt, for Joshua.

Joshua is the one
who "... fit the Battle of Jericho
and the walls came tumbling down."

Jesus is the Greek form
of the Hebrew name *Joshua*.

(I bet the KKK forgot

Jesus was a Jew.

Too bad, the KKK.)

Greek or Hebrew;

Jesus or Joshua;

They both mean the same:

HE WILL SAVE HIS PEOPLE:

or

GOD WILL SAVE HIS PEOPLE!

Matthew added,

FROM THEIR SINS,

as part of the meaning of *Jesus*.

Perhaps Matthew wanted everyone to know

Jesus was not

going to save his people

like Joshua saved his.

TOO BAD!!

Joshua's kind of saving

is the kind of saving we understand.

Who could misunderstand?

There is NO WAY

to make Joshua over

in our own image.

We understand him.

He understands us.²

Not like this baby.

For Joshua it went like this:

ONE day silent

marching 'round the city

to the lonely trumpets blowing

TWO days silent

marching the ghostly crowd

just in from a four hundred year slavery
and a forty year stroll in the desert.
THREE days
marching in deadly silence
save the lonely rams' horn trumpets.
SIX days once each 'round the rosie.
THE SEVENTH day
seven times 'round the city wall,
when the trumpets blew their lonely tune
Joshua said to the silent mob,
"N o w . . .
shout!"

AND THEY SHOUTED
PRAISE THE LORD!!!!
HE GIVES US THE CITY!!!!

They shouted so loud
the walls came tumbling down;
and there was lots of blood and mess.

NOW THAT'S THE WAY TO SAVE YOUR
PEOPLE,
JOSHUA
JOSH U A

Like Star Wars and Waterloo
rolled into one.

But what of this other Joshua
this Joshua Jesus????
What of him
draws us back
to Bethlehem?

More to Bethlehem than to Jericho!
You know.
Once a year,
every year,
to Bethlehem we go.
Just to check and see
if Jesus is still there
in the front of memory
to set us in a hopeful mood.

How ever shall be believe
that baby is God?
How dare we not
b e l i e v e?

Luke says Mary named the baby.

Matthew says it was Joseph.
It's good they agreed,
Mary and Joseph.
But, then, they were taking directions
from an angel.

Joseph
two-thirds asleep
but half awake
It had been that way night after night:
Decisions to make;
Hearts broken;
Hearts to break.

Joseph.
young and virile,
longing for his wife
Their custom seems strange to us.
The marriage ceremony done early,
probably when the bride
was only a girl.
Then she must stay
in her parents' home
until she was older.
Finally,
at a specified time,
the groom
would take his bride home.³

For Joseph
it was in the long interim
when a rumor of scandal
raised its ugly head.
There was going to be a baby.
How could it be?

Little wonder sleep was fitful.
Emotions crowded each other
clamoring for attention
First one to the fore
and then the other:
Disappointment;
Disbelief;
Anger;
Most of all,
Grief.

Still he must do what we must do.
If he made a scene,
Mary would be subject to stoning.

Whatever she had done,
she had done nothing to deserve that.
A quiet divorce was the only way.

Then in a half stupor
amid ruffled and lonely sheets,
in the kind of sleep
when you remember all of your dreams,

An angel came.
FOR MOSES,
THE OVERPOWERING PRESENCE OF GOD
WAS A BURNING BUSH!
FOR PAUL,
THE OVERPOWERING PRESENCE OF GOD
WAS A BLINDING LIGHT!
FOR JOSEPH,
THE OVERPOWERING PRESENCE OF GOD
WAS AN ANGEL IN A DREAM.

"Joseph," said the angel,
"The baby is the Son of God:
conceived by a Holy Spirit."

"Joseph,
name the baby,
claim the baby,
name the baby Jesus.

If you name the baby
the baby will be yours.
It is a legal law.
No matter by whom
the baby was conceived."

"Then Joseph," the angel went on,
"If there is any doubt in your mind
that the baby is the Son of God,
let the baby play with your beard,
and chew on your little finger
when he is cutting his teeth,
and teach him how to be a carpenter
and if he has a bad dream
in the middle of the night
hold him in your strong arms to
tell him everything will be alright
and teach him how to blow his nose
and all those things
he needs to know.
More than anything else, Joseph,

let him love you.
And one thing more:
be sure to laugh
when he tells you a joke.”

“Joseph,” said the angel,
“If you can believe this baby is God,
name him,
claim him,
name him Joshua
or Jesus for short.
He’s going to save his people.
But be sure to call him Jesus.
He’s not going to be nearly so noisy
nor at all as bloody
as the other Joshua.”

The very next day
Joseph brought his bride home
and held her tight.
She was ever so frightened,
and ever so excited,
and, oh, ever so lovely.

It is a love story more beautiful
because it is true.

From then until now
pilgrims without number
have gone to see.

Each year at this time
you also go.
You go from home and office
from school and work
from family and alone.

You take with you
your laughter and grief,
your hopes and fears,
your understandings
and even your misunderstandings.

You gather with the world,
hushed for the moment,
in all of its brutality,
brokenness,
and beauty,

quiet now

If you can believe this baby is God

claim him as your own.
Name him.
Name him Joshua,
and call him Jesus:
He saves his people.

He saves
by touching,
and caring,
and healing;
by playing,
and teaching,
and praying;
by laughing
and crying,
and hoping;
by believing,
and dying,
and living.

Most of all
he saves
by loving you
and showing you how to love.

NOTES

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, N. Y: Image Books, Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1979), 130-131.

² I am indebted to P. W. Turner's one act passion play, *Christ In The Concrete City* for this idea. *Christ In The Concrete City* is handled in the U.S. by Baker Plays of Boston.

³ Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 123-124.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.