

Life-or-Death, De-privileged Communication

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It strikes me that the most important fact about preaching in the contemporary US church is that proclamation of the gospel is no longer a privileged claim. That is, it can no longer assume or appeal to a broadly based consensus that dominates our culture. By that, I do not refer to the fact of pluralism that is unarguable, nor to the loss of institutional clout for the church, nor to the erosion of the social authority of the pastor, though all of these realities surely are important.

Rather I refer to the recognition we must face that construal of the world *without reference to God* is intellectually credible and socially acceptable as it never has been before in Euro-American culture. I suppose one can say that such assumed atheism (no god) or embraced idolatry (distorted god) is the final victory of Enlightenment consciousness.¹ But that victory has come about, so it seems to me, rather unintentionally and issues in vulgar, unexamined forms.

The upshot of that changed intellectual, social climate is that preaching has to start “farther back,” because nothing is conceded by the listening assembly at the outset. This is obviously true for people who have long since given up on gospel claims of the church, either because these claims are misunderstood through stereotypes of superstition or coercion or because these claims are rightly understood as too costly and too disruptive of a self-focused life. But more important, it appears to me that in some large measure, “nothing is conceded” even in the baptismal community, for even baptized people (including perhaps you, dear reader, and me as writer) have learned to construe the real practice of our lives without reference to the claims of God. Thus the beginning is not in *assent*, but at the most, in open *wonderment* and perhaps, down deep, in hidden, resentful *resistance*.

In such a social environment, it is evident that a different mode of preaching and different expectations on the part of the preacher may be important. The de-privileging of the claims of the sermon repositions the sermon (and the preacher) in terms of communication. My suggestion, growing out of my recent study of Old Testament theology, is that the genre of *testimony* (as bid for assent), rather than *proclamation* (on an assumption of universal consensus), is how ancient Israel proceeded to claim truth in a like situation.² It is how we might, I suggest, rethink the genre of the sermon.

I understand that the term “testimony” in staid Calvinist ears, for example, calls to mind emotive, primitive religious talk among certain Baptists that is not well informed or well disciplined. In ancient usage, however, “testimony” refers not to religious emoting. It refers rather to a courtroom exercise in which the “truth of the matter” is deeply contested, and different witnesses are called upon to give accounts of “the truth of the matter” that turn out to be profoundly contradictory. The recent trials of O. J. Simpson and Timothy McVeigh make available to us a social environment of *contested truth with competing bids for assent*.

With the loss of Christian consensus and theological hegemony, “the truth of the matter” is greatly contested, the truth about the reality and character of God and the consequent reality and character of the world. There was a time of consensus in the West when the preacher could speak from high philosophical and moral ground simply

to reiterate “what we all believe.” Now, however, the preacher offers a construal of reality that sits alongside other construals of God and world reality, each of which has its adherents and its points of credibility.³

The *dethroning of Christian privilege* and the need for the risk of testimony are perhaps illuminated by citing three examples of testimony as *bids for assent*:

1. Elie Wiesel has spent his life in determination that the barbaric reality of the Jewish holocaust shall not be forgotten. He has observed that the truth of the holocaust is deeply disputed and there are those who insist it never happened. More than that, he has observed that the truth of the holocaust depends completely upon the witnesses, people who are not sophisticated but who are credible through the character of their testimony, through their capacity to tell credibly how it was with them.⁴

2. A great deal of attention has been given to the practice of “stories of woundedness” among those who are ill and who require medical attention. “Scientific medicine,” rather like “consensus theological truth,” has had no need of stories, because it operated out of the “truth of medicine” that was established “from above,” as was theological truth. Without denying the important claims of scientific medicine, more recent observers have noticed that suffering people need to tell the story of suffering, so to engage others in a relatedness of suffering whereby healing may happen as a relational phenomenon. Indeed Arthur Frank has offered a chapter entitled “testimony,” giving evidence of the ways a sufferer must construe reality “from below,” that is, out of pain.⁵

3. The other day I was at noon in a bank-teller line, observing to the woman next to me in line how most bank tellers took long lunch breaks just when I wanted one to be available. That comment triggered in the woman behind me, whom I did not know, the opportunity for her to tell me her story of being cheated by a fast-food place out of fifty dollars of low-pay wages, and to report that she never got a lunch break. She then told me that she planned to bring a suit against the company for having cheated her. She said, “I will probably lose, but I will have been heard.” She told me that message three times in four minutes. She was giving “testimony,” and she would give more of it in court, stating her bid for truth. It was, moreover, urgent that she be heard, even if the fast-food company would be dominant in court, as she herself anticipated. She will have been heard with her version of truth!

Notice in all three cases, testimony comes as a truth “from below” in the face of a “stronger truth” that is hegemonic:

- a) Jewish *survivors* midst scientific analysis of what happened;
- b) *sufferers* midst medical science, and
- c) the “*cheated woman*” in the face of a powerful fast-food chain.

Each of these witnesses makes a bid for a version of the truth.

Such testimony is characteristically:⁶

- 1. *Fragile*. It depends upon the nerve of the teller;
- 2. *Local*. It makes no sweeping, universal claim, but appeals to what is concretely known;
- 3. *Persuasive*. The rhetorical casting aims at winning the jury;
- 4. *Contested*. It dares utterance in the presence of other claims that may be more powerful and more credible.
- 5. *Fragmented*. It is only a bit of a narrative that brings with it a whole theory of reality that is implied but left unexpressed.

Such claims for truth are not loud, arrogant, or sweeping. They are modest but insistent and sometimes compelling. The connection of *testimony-trial-truth-jury* means that truth is not available ahead of time, before the utterance. It is available only after, through the utterance, when the jury reaches its verdict. So it is with the sermon, when the sermon is de-positioned from the judge's bench to the witness box.

II.

It has occurred to me that the Old Testament is essentially de-privileged testimony that construes the world alternatively.⁷ It is de-privileged because it is the evidence offered by a community that is early *nomads or peasants* and that is late a community of *exiles*. Either way, as peasants or as exiles, Israel lives a great distance from the great hegemonic seats of power and the great centers of intellectual-theological certitude. Israel always comes into the great courtroom of public opinion and disrupts the court, in order to tell a tale of reality that does not mesh with the emerging consensus that more powerful people have put together.

At the center of this odd account of reality is this Character Yahweh, whom Pharaoh does not know (Exod. 5:2) and whom the winners in the world by and large ignore. It is this strange God—so this testimony asserts—who comes among barren women to give births (Gen. 21:1-7), who comes into slave camps to set free (Exod. 15:20-21), who sends bread from heaven into wilderness contexts of hunger (Exod. 16:13-18), who governs the rise and fall of great powers (I Sam. 2:6-8), who places widows, orphans, and illegal aliens at the center of the economic-political debate (Deut. 24:17-22; Isa. 1:17).

Israel on occasion will tell of this Holy Fidelity that is textured with impatient violence *to outsiders*, inviting others to join in doxology to this odd Character:

Praise the Lord, all you nations,

Extol him, all you peoples! (Psalm 117:1; cf. Psalm 67:3-5).

It is an odd *hutzpah*-filled invitation to ask nations and peoples to join to sing of this alternative Reality on the basis of *local* experience:

For great is his steadfast love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the lord endures forever (v. 2).

More characteristically Israel tells this peculiar version of reality to *its own children*, intending that this offbeat testimony at the center of this community will persist as a viable social force into the next generation:

When in the future your child asks you, "What does this mean?" you shall answer, "By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt from the house of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human firstborn to the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord every male that first opens the womb, but every firstborn of my sons I redeem." It shall serve as a sign on your hand and as an emblem on your forehead that by strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt (Exod. 13:14-16).

Most regularly, however, this *testimony of alternative truth* is offered to members of the community by members of the community. The purpose of such incessant testimony is to nurture and sustain each other in odd vision, because without such

nurture and sustenance, it is for sure that members of the community will fall out of this truth into other more attractive, more palatable, less costly truth.

III.

The clearest evidence for this process of testimony, I take it, is the poetry of II Isaiah (Isa. 40-55). This poetry, it is commonly agreed, is uttered to Jewish exiles who have been deported to Babylon and who must practice their faith and their countertruth in a world of Babylonian hegemony. It is unmistakable that Babylon was not only a political-military superpower. It was also an advanced, sophisticated, winsome culture with its own theological rationale and its own moral justifications. Over time, the powerful attractiveness of Babylon must have been deeply compelling to many Jews.

Into this context of *seduction and resistance* comes the preacher-poet, II Isaiah. I cite only one pair of verses that evidence the contested, demanding situation of Jewish faith in the empire:

Do not fear, or be afraid;
have I not told you from of old and declared it?
You are my witnesses!
Is there any god besides me?
There is no other rock; I know not one (Isa. 44:8).

In this brief assurance and summons offered by Yahweh, there are three identifiable components:

1. Israel—Jews in exile—are summoned and identified as *witnesses for Yahweh*. Witnesses do not come to court neutrally. They are “friendly” or “hostile,” summoned either by the prosecution or the defense. Israel is summoned and authorized to come to the court of public opinion in order to line out to the court the Yahweh-version of reality and to bid for assent to this truth.

2. The *witness is instructed*. A good attorney briefs the witness; so Yahweh instructs Israel as witness to assert in court that “Yahweh is the only one,” that Yahweh is a rock without any competitors.⁸

3. Most astonishingly, Yahweh *assures the witness* Israel, “do not fear; do not be afraid.” The situation is not unlike a fragile person who goes to an attorney in the secret of the night with evidence that will blow the case open. But that evidence is dangerous and the witness will be at risk. In order not to lose the testimony (and consequently the case) because of fearfulness, the attorney assures the witness that “it will be all right.” In Babylon, it was hazardous to the health of Israel to witness to Yahweh and so to contradict the massive Babylonian claim to legitimacy and absoluteness. No wonder the witness must be reassured, “Do not fear.”

Jews exist, so says this poetry, to make the case in the empire for a different truth, a different presentation of reality, a different basis for humanness in the world. The case to be made in court by Israel is, of course, not uncontested. So the text goes on to say,

All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit;

their witnesses neither see nor know. And so they will be put to shame (v. 9).

The empire also has its gods. And those gods also have witnesses. And those witnesses come into court as well, to make their polished, sophisticated case before the court. One would expect, of course, that these witnesses would offer compelling testimony for the empire, because they have all of the best evidence, the slickest lawyers, the best research, the most compelling style. Except, says the text, they are *tôhû*; they are embodiments of chaos, agents of disorder who are blind and deaf. They are hopeless witnesses advocating a hopeless truth.

And so the issue is joined in court. The poetry does not pay much attention to the evidence brought by Babylonian witnesses, treating it all as a weak joke (44:9-20). Rather all the energy goes to the testimony to be given by Israel, for a countertruth about a counter-God with a counterethic in the world.

1. This testimony by Israel offers a past that is saturated with *life-giving miracles*, not a past filled with self-sufficiency achievement. So the poet appeals to Abraham and Sarah, a test case in Israel's memory, for the ways in which this God could take this hopeless old couple and create a vibrant community:

Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.
Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him.
but I blessed him and made him many (Isa. 51:1-2;
see Hebrews 11:11-12).

From that testimony derives a claim that we live in a world of life-giving miracles, not to be matched or stopped by the empire.

2. This testimony from Israel offers a future that is marked by *circumstance-defying promises* completely freed from the present tense that is too sober. So it is promised:

For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the Lord, who has compassion on you.
O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted,
I am about to set your stones in antimony,
and lay your foundations with sapphires.
I will make your pinnacles of rubies,
your gates of jewels,
and all your wall of precious stones.
All your children shall be taught by the Lord,
and great shall be the prosperity of your children.
In righteousness you shall be established;
you shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear;

and from terror, for it shall not come near you (54:10-14).
For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace...
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle (55:12-13).

From this testimony emerges a future of complete *shalom* that is free of violence, brutality, competitiveness, and scarcity, a new governance that displaces that of the empire.

3. This testimony offers a *present tense filled with neighbors* to whom we are bound in fidelity, in obligation, and in mutual caring. Everywhere on the lips of this witness is the term “justice,” that entails inclusiveness for all those that the empire finds objectionable and unproductive:

I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth *justice* to the nations.
he will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth *justice*.
he will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established *justice* in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his Torah (42:1-4).

Thus appeal is made:

a past of life-giving miracles;
a future of circumstance-denying promise;
a present tense of neighbors in fidelity.

This testimony matters. It matters to stay in this truth. It matters to practice this version of life. And of course the imperial thought-police, present in every preaching situation, recognize that it matters. It matters because the members of this odd community will not give in to the blandishments of the empire, and so will remain an emancipated, unintimidated counterculture in the empire. It matters beyond that, because even the agents of the empire occasionally recognize the credible character of this talk that will eventually subvert and collapse the empire.⁹

The preaching office is an office of an alternative truth that makes its bid for assent. It does so, moreover, in the face of the empire that wants to stop talk of *miracles*, *promises*, and *neighbors*, because such talk runs against the grain of imperial, ruthless self-sufficiency. And thus soon or late—as every preacher knows—agents of the status quo will move in to halt the countertruth. They may be friendly or hard, open or covert. But they will try. Against such a risk, the sender says “fear not.”

IV.

It is my hunch that, give or take a little, every preaching context and every preaching occasion is something like that. The preaching of the gospel is not the voice of the dominant empire, but offers a truthfulness that may be confrontational or subtle,

but eventually conflicts with imperial truth. I have no doubt that it is emancipatory for the preacher to recognize our actual preaching context that, in the past Christian West, is unprecedented. We are de-privileged, but thereby free, because we need no longer carry water for the empire as was a given in a previous power arrangement.

This sense of being de-privileged struck me powerfully the other day. I read in the *New York Times* a report on the violent military-social revolution in Sierra Leone.¹⁰ The *Times* carried a picture of a soldier holding back a protesting crowd. The crowd of young people in that disadvantaged situation faced the power of status quo soldiers. They were waiting eagerly and impatiently for food. And one of the young lads was there with a Nike cap.

And then I thought, Nike, with its US heroes of Tiger and Michael and its complementary Asian sweatshops, has become a universal symbol for greed and individual exploitativeness. (I do not single out Nike or Tiger or Michael, except as they embody in the most effective way the dominant truth of privatized success offered to the young.) It is astounding, in my judgment, that the Nike “Swoosh” has become a universal symbol for success and well-being even without any verbalization. It is a symbol worn by unthinking, affluent suburbanites. It is a symbol worn by poor people in third-world economies who can for a moment entertain a fantasy. It is a symbol worn by the baptized so narcotized that we do not notice the irony.

In the world of Nike, moreover, the cross is a lonesome symbol of costly self-giving for the neighbor. (The cross on the wane perhaps has a companion in waning of the Hammer and Sickle of Marxian thought that cannot withstand Nike and the Crescent of Islam that cannot withstand Nike).

And so the preacher must stand up and tell the truth in an environment where Nike seems a given and where many “Jewish exiles” submit to Babylonian truth without any awareness what such submission costs for our baptism. When the contradiction between the symbols and between sworn accounts of reality are exposed, imperial agents will be quick to move. In the world of “swoosh,” preaching the crucified One is a dangerous business, profoundly de-privileged.

It is de-privileged communication; of that there can be no doubt. But such preaching is, I have no doubt, life or death. Because what this gospel asserts matters to our common future;

It matters if *life-giving miracles* are scuttled for the sake of can-do achievements;

It matters if *circumstance-denying promises* are silenced for the sake of winning at all costs.

It matters if *bonded neighbors* are excommunicated in a passion for private *shalom*.

It matters because the makers of phoney cultural icons are *tôhû*, agents of chaos, manufacturers of disorder that brings nothing but abusive trouble among brothers and sisters (Isa. 44:9). It matters! The preacher and the sermon are life-or-death and deeply de-privileged. In the face of that danger with such a freighted alternative truth, the poet says, “Do not fear.”

Notes

¹ On the production of atheism as a viable alternative in modernism, see Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

² I have explicated this theme at length in Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997)

³ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 20, comments on the work of a historian and the construction of a historical account

It is the fact that they can be recorded otherwise, in an order of narrative, that makes them, at one and the same time, questionable as to their authenticity and susceptible to being considered as tokens of reality. In order to qualify as historical, an event must be susceptible to at least two narrations of its occurrence. Unless at least two versions of the same set of events can be imagined, there is no reason for the historian to take upon himself the authority of giving the true account of what really happened.

Mutatis mutandis, the same is true for the preacher. The only reason the preaching task is important is that the same data of life can be construed differently, that is, without reference to Yahweh who is the main character in "our" version. This recognition that the truth of the matter can be given in an alternative, credible version is an important facet of our new preaching situation.

⁴ This is in general the burden of the writing program of Wiesel. Reference may be made, for example, to *The Trial of God* (New York: Random House, 1978). An assessment of this work concerning testimony by Wiesel is offered by Robert McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), and see Wiesel's own account of his work, *Elie Wiesel: Memoirs: All Rivers Run to the Sea* (New York: Knopf, 1995). The most poignant statement of Wiesel on the theme of "testimony" is, Wiesel, "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration," *Dimensions of Holocaust* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977), 9.

If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony.

Wiesel refers to the requirement of testimony with reference to the holocaust, because the truth of the holocaust is *in dispute* and the outcome depends upon the *witnesses*.

⁵ Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁶ The same qualities mark the primal stories that the early church told about Jesus that became the basis for the worship and faith of the early church.

⁷ I will stick to the Old Testament, but it is clear that the same de-privileged situation operates in the New Testament, as is evident in Paul's testimony before imperial officials in the book of Acts.

⁸ It is on this basis that scholars characteristically declare that the rise of monotheism in the Old Testament is linked to II Isaiah. See the evidence summarized by Bernard Lang, *Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority* (The Social World of Biblical Antiquity Series 1, Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983) and more recently, *The Triumphs of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms*, ed. Diana Vikander Edelman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). However that may be, it is unmistakable that the establishment of monotheism was no concern of the poet.

⁹ The "education" of Pharaoh through the processes of the Exodus narrative is a case in point. At the outset Pharaoh disclaims any awareness of Yahweh (Exod. 5:2). By 8:25, he acknowledges "your God." In 8:28 he again refers to "your god" and asks for prayers. In 10:16 he confesses sin against "your god" and by 12:21 recognizes that blessing is in the power of the God of Moses. The learning curve for Pharaoh is perhaps typical for those who live out of a different, hegemonic narrative.

¹⁰ *New York Times*, 11 June 1997.