

Protagonist Corner

The Preaching Task

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Of the three definitions given for *protagonist* in my copy of the unabridged edition of *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, the second seems most descriptive of the persons whose respective prose is requested to fill this space in each edition of *Journal For Preachers*: “protagonist, *n*, a spokesman [sic] (it’s from the 1973 edition) or advocate of an idea, political or social program, etc; a person who champions a cause.” That the editors of a publication bearing the name *Journal for Preachers* should think the task of preaching needs such a patron is somewhere between ironic and frightening. That the voice of the thus recruited patron should be relegated to a *corner* of that journal is, perhaps, an appropriate subject for an essay to occupy this space in a subsequent issue.

To talk about the task of preaching, of course, is to cut to the heart of what it means to be ordained as a preacher. That is particularly true if one sees, as any reasonable observer from the Reformed Tradition must, that ordination, properly understood, is to *function* rather than to *status*. That is to say, when, in the Reformed Tradition, one is called out of the Christian community and set aside through ordination to be a preacher, the act speaks more, if not exclusively, to the person’s function in the community than it speaks to the person’s status in the community.

In practice, of course, such a view is not widely held either by those ordained as preachers or by those by and for whom we are ordained to preach.¹ It is, nevertheless true. Simply stated, the function or task of the preacher as assigned by God through the voice of the believing community is to go regularly to the ancient truth of Holy Scripture and to return to the community of faith to proclaim a fresh message from the one holy God. Because that is so,

—Any preacher who is not utterly terrified by such crushing responsibility does not understand fully the gravity of his or her call and is not to be trusted;

—Any preacher who can sleep soundly on Saturday nights is ill prepared and is not to be taken seriously; and

—Any preacher who has no form of gastrointestinal distress on Sunday mornings has not dealt seriously with the texts for the day and is not to be heeded.

Faced with such a gut-wrenching assignment, the preacher does well to use all of the tools at his or her disposal. First among those, of course, is the text. I used to think all preaching had to start with the text or, whatever else it might have been, it was not preaching. I’ve gotten over that. There is some preaching, rare though it surely is, when events in the life of the worshipping community dictate that a topic must be taken first and a text second. For the most part, however, preaching must begin with the text or texts. To state the obvious, in the overwhelming majority of

cases, it becomes the first task of the preacher to discover, as best one can, what God first said through the text/s, what God has said over the millennia through the text/s, and what God is saying now through the text/s. How one goes about making such discoveries will vary widely from preacher to preacher. If, however, the methods you are using to accomplish this first task do not elicit visceral as well as cognitive reaction, you probably should try a different method.

The second task or function for the one called out and sent regularly by the community of faith to Holy Scripture is for the preacher to spend a great deal of time living with and among the community of believers that sends him or her to the texts and eagerly awaits his or her return with a message from God. To say, if one is to preach effectively, the preacher must know the joys and sorrows, the delights and pains, and the hopes and fears of his or her people and the world in which they live is, once again, to state the obvious. What may be less obvious in this second task of preaching is the recognition that both the preacher and his or her people, to the extent they are living faithfully the Gospel of Christ, are living as exiles (to use the image often used by Walter Brueggemann and others). The Christian community and the truth given to us are not at home in the places we live. Outside of the community of faith, our religion is nowhere dominant, our standards of behavior are nowhere normative, and our speech is nowhere heeded. That means, whatever else God is saying today through God's ancient texts, God is speaking a strong word of real hope to those who have no other hope or who are yet sadly hanging onto the thin hope left in the wake of ill-spent human enlightenment. If you can't find a message of hope on the topside of every text, look on the underside. If you can't find it in either place, perhaps you should look from a different vantage point.

A third task or function of the one ordained to preach, and the last one to be treated here, is the task of claiming the identity of a poet. If you are one who is called to preach, the gospel of truth, each morning as you are looking in the mirror to affix your makeup; or, by case, as you are removing (or combing) your whiskers, you must say to your mirror image, "I am a poet of the church; and, by God's sovereign mercy, I shall be a good one, filled with passion, imagination, spit, vinegar, bile, and grace." It is no accident that our story begins with God's using the power of the spoken word to create everything that is. Neither is it an accident that, in a none-too-subtle play on that same text, John, the most wild-eyed and raucous of the evangelists, named our Jesus *Word*. Words are powerful instruments and, in preaching the truth of God and of his Jesus, the selection of words is powerfully important. The simple truth is: *Boring sermon* is an oxymoron. That is, if any given Lord's Day offering is boring, the truth of God and of his Jesus has not been seriously and passionately engaged. That alone, by definition, means the effort is not a sermon. If your congregation is having trouble staying awake during worship, perhaps you should invest in a good Thesaurus or at least discover the limp one on your word processor.

Note

1. In the Presbyterian Church (USA), in which denomination I am a preacher, we are, of course, referred to as Ministers of Word and Sacrament. Though *Word* and *Sacrament* can scarcely be separated, the assigned task for this article is to address the former.