

Protagonist Corner

No News Is Not Good News

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When the parent of a teenager hasn't heard from the police department on a Friday night, no news may well be good news. But when it comes to preaching, no news is not good news at all. No news is simply bad preaching. I suspect that part of the problem here is that our present-day electronic culture provides "news" around the clock.

Perhaps you remember the fine movie *Newsies* about the young paper boys of an earlier era whose vital public service was to deliver the news morning and evening day after day. Remember how people would gather on the street corners waiting anxiously for the newsies to come bringing the latest edition? Remember how news from Walter Cronkite or Huntley and Brinkley was a daily, special, anticipated event? The weekly and daily "news cycles" have now been reduced to "minute by minute" coverage. The twenty-four hour instant availability of whatever we want to know may have flattened the world, but it has also anesthetized us to the point that we can hardly tell when we have actually heard something that qualifies as news.

I often wonder if our recent fascination with "entertainment-style worship" and "powerpoint preaching" isn't some sort of attempt to force the news we have out into the open. Fearful that our message is not getting through, we adopt and adapt and repackage the goods to the point it looks more and more like everything else we see and hear and encounter. All of a sudden what we do in the church begins to blend in with its surroundings, and its distinctiveness and clarity is lost once again. One morning we all wake up and discover that the churches that never managed to get on board with these new movements – those that basically just get together and sing and pray, preach and celebrate sacraments – are without any warning on the cutting edge of a revolution that is impossible to hold back. Much to our amazement, we discover that what really sells is not the packaging but the content. We too easily allowed ourselves to believe that the medium is the message. Now we have a never-ending medium and all-too-little message. Perhaps we can now begin to discover afresh that it was really about the news all along: the good news of Jesus.

In my nearly two decades of teaching homiletics, I found that keeping my students focused on "the news" was both the hardest part of the job and also the most rewarding. Discovering passion about the news is the most valuable lesson to be learned for their future ministries in the church. The best rhetorical strategy, careful exegesis, thoughtful theology, pastoral sensitivity, oral style, and effective delivery in the world will not make them decent preachers: they have to know the news, believe the news, and be compelled to share the news. And they have to know and internalize that their vocation is to be a very special breed of newsies. Several years ago I mused with some of my colleagues in the academy that a homiletics class might well be a carefully crafted disguise for a course in the spirituality of public ministry.

My older brother was a newspaperman of the old school. By the time he retired he had been the editor or publisher of several major American dailies. He was a breed unto

himself. For years we had a very special kind of connection, and it was not just because we were brothers. We discovered that we were both in the news business. In our long conversations over the years, the principal thing he taught me was the importance of distinguishing between an event and the news of an event. He believed strongly that even the greatest and most profound events rarely made much of a difference in people's lives or in the life of the world. But he believed just as strongly that how those events are reported, how the story is told, *how it becomes news*, has the power to change the course of human history.

One of his favorite examples of this principle (and he had lots of them!) was the assassination of President Kennedy. A man by the name of Lee Harvey Oswald shot the president as his motorcade made its way through Dallas. The president was injured, blood was splattered on Mrs. Kennedy, a bullet wounded Governor Connally, and a few Secret Service men got winded. The president died a short time later. That was pretty much the event. In global perspective it was a rather insignificant few moments. DATELINE: Dallas, Texas. November 22, 1963. The President of the United States of America is dead.

That's the news! It reverberated around the globe.

Nations were shaken and kingdoms tottered. The event itself was relatively minor. The event itself was over and done with in a matter of minutes on a November afternoon decades ago. But the news of it continues to this day to change the world. It is a reference point in American and in world history. Only a small handful of people felt the direct impact of the event, but everyone who was alive at the time knows exactly where they were, who they were with, and what they were doing *when they heard the news* that President Kennedy was dead. And those who were not yet born when President Kennedy was killed live their lives in a world still reeling from the news of it.

Perhaps a personal example will be useful. Some time ago, an old and dear friend was tragically killed in an automobile accident. At the time of his death, I was frolicking on the Outer Banks of North Carolina with my family, completely oblivious to the tragedy. When my friend died, I felt no pain, no sadness, and no grief. The rites of Christian burial came and went without my knowledge or participation. My friend's death had no impact upon me whatsoever. Months later, and quite by accident, *I heard the news* of his death. I was shocked. I was angry. I was distraught. By that time, his family and other close friends were well into the healing of their pain and grief. For me, however, it was as raw and tender as could be. My experience was very much in the immediacy of the moment when I heard the news. My friend's death caused me no pain, but the news of it nearly killed me.

The implications of this for preaching the gospel are clear: *lives are changed not when words are spoken but when news is heard.* Let's think about this for a moment in reference to the most critical event – the core event without which nothing else makes much of a difference – at the heart of the gospel, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Consider this statement: The Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead never changed anyone's life! Before you call the heresy hunters, think through this with me.

You remember the resurrection narratives. Who was there? No one, basically. There was that angel-guy sitting on the rolled-away stone, but remember, angels are messengers; he heard it from someone else. Mary and the other women make their way

to the tomb. They lug their jars of embalming ointments, fresh cloth to wrap the body of Jesus, perhaps some incense to cover the odor of the decaying flesh. They make their way in the light darkness of early morning, overcome by sadness and despair, and filled with fear at the thought of everything their future might hold. (Jesus by this time has already been risen for an hour or so and is on his way to Galilee to surprise the other disciples.) Nothing about the resurrection of the Savior has changed anything in the lives of the women on their way to the tomb. Why? (“Why do you seek the living among the dead?”) Because they have not heard. (“He is not here. He is risen!”) News! Immediately their lives are changed because they have heard the news that Jesus is risen from the dead!

All the while, the other disciples are locked behind closed doors, and as far as they are concerned, life is about as desperate as it gets. (Jesus is risen, remember, but the disciples don’t know it.) So the women go in haste to the place where the disciples are in mourning with *the news* that Jesus is risen from the dead. And that *news* has spread from behind those fast-closed doors to the ends of the earth, changing the lives of those who *hear the news* that the one who was dead is alive forevermore.

Got any news?