

Deeply Dialogical: Rethinking the Conversation Called Preaching

Mike Graves

Central Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, Kansas

The Jewish critic George Steiner claims that “God is capable of all speech acts except that of monologue.”¹ In other words, God chooses to be in dialogue with us. Only a few verses into Genesis we not only read about God creating order out of chaos, but we hear God speak, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3). Only three verses into the story, and already the narrator employs quotation marks. Direct, not indirect, discourse will characterize God’s ways with creation. Let there be plants, and let there be planets. Let there be this, and let there be that. If the first page of Scripture is any indication, God is going to do a lot of talking.

Unfortunately, while God wants to talk with creation, sometimes the creation doesn’t want to participate in dialogue. Recall Israel’s spotted record when it comes to listening to the prophets, or the prophets themselves who didn’t always want to listen either. Then there are the times when people try to prevent others from participating in dialogue. Recall that story in Mark’s Gospel when Jesus is passing through Jericho and a blind beggar by the name of Bartimaeus cries out for mercy. Those standing nearby act like librarians, shushing him mercilessly, even as he cries out all the more (Mk. 10:48). This shushing is nothing less than an act of violence, a way of denying someone’s existence. Think about women in the United States not being able to vote until the early part of the twentieth century or the silencing of women in the pulpit even today in some places.² Think about the oppression of blacks and the resulting Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. Or think about the “enemy combatants” at Guantanamo Bay who apparently have no rights whatsoever.

So the shushers do their shushing and Bartimaeus cries out all the more. Jesus notices him and calls him over. Suddenly the shushers become encouragers, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you” (Mk. 10:49). While Jesus’ question (“What do you want me to do for you?”) seems a bit ridiculous, Bartimaeus is invited into dialogue, a real conversation. In his own words he tells Jesus he wants to regain his sight. The story ends not just with his healing, but his following Jesus “on the way” (Mk. 10:52). The one who was marginalized and silent becomes a part of the community, joining Jesus and the others.

Dialogue is nothing new to preaching, but in homiletics dialogue is typically restricted to only the literal kind. While that is one type of dialogue, it might be more helpful to think of three different types: literal, internal, and deep. Let me explain. In the late 1960s and more recently in the Emerging Church movement, preachers have experimented with various models of *literal dialogue*—one or more preachers taking turns during the sermon, or the congregation adding their own insights to the preacher’s, to cite just two examples.

In the early 1970s *internal dialogue* began to appear on the preaching scene. Fred Craddock launched what became known as the New Homiletic with his stress on inductive sermon flow. This was not a literal kind of dialogue, but the preacher giving voice to the kinds of concerns listeners might bring to texts and life. As Craddock

notes, for far too long, if listeners were part of the preaching event at all, it was as “javelin catcher.”³ Craddock sought to correct that imbalance, and internal dialogue in its various expressions arose as a way to honor how listeners participate in preaching, albeit in a silent kind of internal dialogue. This kind of dialogue is what we hope happens in all good preaching.

The third type, *deep dialogue*, is more metaphor than technique. Deep dialogue occurs when the preacher says something that matters, when the preacher names the longings of all God’s children, in personal and global ways. As Walter Brueggemann observes, “The church—summoned, formed, and empowered by the God of all dialogue—has in our anxiety-driven society an opportunity to be deeply dialogical about the most important issues.”⁴ This, too, is another kind of dialogue that we hope happens in our preaching.

Homiletical trends over the past thirty-five years or so have focused mostly on internal dialogue, and while more recently preachers have been experimenting once again with literal dialogue, I am more interested in deep dialogue. Or to be more precise, I am interested in the relationship between the two—literal and deep.

Unfortunately, both in the 1960s and the Emerging Church movement today, while literal dialogue has been something of a trend, so has silence—and oddly enough, at the same time. What I mean is that too often preachers have remained silent about issues that matter (the Vietnam War or the never-ending “war on terror”; the riots in Watts and Detroit or the lessons of post-Katrina New Orleans, to cite just a few examples). This silence has occurred while preachers experimented with literal dialogue. How ironic, dialogue and silence!

As a teacher of preaching I am interested in the literal dialogue trend for a lot of reasons, not the least of which is that some of my students are experimenting with it in their churches, but I am much more interested in the lack of deep dialogue in our day because while the church is talking once again (clergy and laity alike), the topic of conversation doesn’t always seem to matter. Sad to say, but the church has become the homiletical equivalent of so many news outlets, more interested in Britney Spears’s latest exploits than genocide or global warming. This shallowness is something we preachers should talk about. So let’s begin with deep dialogue.

Conversations that Matter: Deep Dialogue

Nearly twenty-five years ago Neil Postman wrote one of the most important books that many preachers never read, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Postman begins by reminding readers of George Orwell’s predictions in his once futuristic work, *1984*, how one day Big Brother might: 1) ban books, 2) withhold information from us, and 3) conceal the truth. Postman says that at roughly the same time, Aldous Huxley predicted something else entirely. In *Brave New World*, Huxley predicted that a time would come when: 1) no one would want to read books, 2) we would be overwhelmed with information, and 3) the truth would drown in a sea of irrelevance. As Postman puts it, his book is about “the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right.”⁵

As just one example of the grip of our entertainment culture, Postman contrasts then current political debate (1985) with the seven debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, some of which lasted as long as seven hours. And this was not a presidential race, not even a race for senate. Contrast that with our most recent

political debate, the network host monitoring the event, “The question is about measures to stem global warming. You have ninety seconds to answer.” I think a similar dynamic is at work in much preaching today as well.

In order to address some of the complexities of deep dialogue, I want us to look at Psalms 42 and 43, originally one organic piece of poetry.⁶ Taking clues from Walter Brueggemann’s treatment of another psalm, I want us to hear four distinct “voices” within the psalm—the schizophrenic self, the people of God, the systemic powers of evil, and God—all of which are dynamic and disturbing partners in the conversation of this Hebrew poem.

The Schizophrenic Self

Contrary to the contemporary chorus joyfully sung in churches everywhere (“As the deer panteth for the water, so my soul longs after you...”), the self-talk in this psalm begins in complete despair. While many churches project these words on a screen, complete with the image of a beautiful doe lapping water from an idyllic stream, Claus Westermann claims it should be translated as a deer panting over a dry ravine.⁷ This poor creature is dying of thirst. In a phrase, the psalmist is desperate.

Yet this same desperate “self” cries out confidently three times in the psalm’s refrain, “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God” (42:5; 42:11; 43:5). This schizophrenia, which is common in psalms of lament, reflects the self-talk of all God’s children according to Brueggemann. He writes, “During the day, the speaker might imagine his entire life in the single, unified, coherent, manageable self-announcement. But at night, that singular coherence falls apart into a cacophony of voices, all of which press for airtime.”⁸ Deeply dialogical preaching acknowledges that we all live in what Alan Lewis calls “Holy Saturday,” with one foot firmly planted in Good Friday and the other in Easter Sunday.⁹ Deep dialogue acknowledges the schizophrenic self-talk of all God’s children.

The People of God

The psalm’s cacophony of voices also includes communal remembrance, how he “went with the throng, and led them in the procession to the house of God” (42:4). Contrary to the Lone Ranger spirituality common today, the Scriptures are exceptionally communal. In the New Testament the stress on community is so pronounced it uses second person plural pronouns almost exclusively—“y’all” is how we said it in Texas. The New Testament is so corporate that even in the personal letter from Paul to Philemon, what begins with “you” (singular) gradually gives way to “y’all” (plural).

In his book *The Homiletic of All Believers*, Wes Allen proposes that we think of Sunday’s sermon as part of an ongoing dialogue within the life of the church community.¹⁰ More importantly, he says, the conversation should include the topics everyone is talking about, in the church and in the world—war, genocide, famine, taxes, elections, sexuality, crime, the environment, domestic violence, the list goes on and on. Deep dialogue means the preacher names the longings of all God’s children, longings for personal and global justice.

Systemic Powers of Evil

The psalmist also writes about those who taunt him, adversaries who in essence ask, “So where’s your God now?” (42:3, 10). Most scholars believe the historical

context was the Exile, following the destruction of the Temple. Experiences of Exile still happen, as a visit to a homeless shelter, nursing home, or a prison will bear witness. Deeply dialogical preaching engages with our present day and speaks truth to power, as homiletician Charles Campbell has eloquently noted.¹¹ In our day the powers that need to be challenged include a long list of “isms”: ageism, sexism, classism, racism, and even capitalism as our own never-ending thirst for oil has obviously shaped foreign policy here in the United States.

The Voice(s) of God

In a sense the whole of Psalms 42 and 43 happens in dynamic conversation with God, but there are specific lines when the psalmist moves from conversing *with* God to a conversing *about* God. Even the direct engagement with God moves back and forth between praise and lament. This fluidity is something of a metaphor for the complexities deep dialogue needs to acknowledge when interpreting the Scriptures, as opposed to so much shallow preaching in our day. Many church-goers grow up exposed to the God of the Bible as some flat deity, predictable and easily pigeon-holed. The Scriptures, as it turns out, are not like the old Radio Shack slogan, “You’ve got questions. We’ve got answers!” Consider just a few examples.

For instance, sometimes various writers offer contradictory theologies. Amos announces a direct link between Israel’s and Judah’s disobedience and their punishment in Exile (Amos 2:4-8), while Job’s story stresses that sin is not behind every form of suffering (Job 1:1-12). Or in the New Testament Paul claims that the government is appointed by God (Rom. 13), while John, exiled to Patmos, portrays the Roman Empire as a beast (Rev. 13).

Or sometimes a biblical story runs counter to our simple Sunday school training, like when Abraham nearly sacrifices Isaac on the altar and after intervening God says, “Now I know that you fear God” (Gen. 22:12). How could God not have known ahead of time? These are the kinds of questions that children especially bring to the Bible, the kind that have forced many a Sunday school teacher to shush the kids or declare, “Ok, children, I think it’s time to have a snack now.” This shushing has been part of our preaching as well.

Thankfully, in recent years a multiplicity of interpretations and acknowledging theological complexity has become more accepted by parishioners, many of whom have given up on a steady diet of “chicken soup” and “left behind” pabulum. Some lay folks have started reading authors with more calories to offer—scholars such as Marcus Borg, John Shelby Spong, and N. T. Wright, and memoirs by writers with spunk, folks like Anne Lamott and Nora Gallagher.

Talking amongst Ourselves: Literal Dialogue

Trends toward literal dialogue may be more than just trends; they might tap into an ecclesiology we have overlooked. In the late 1960s when God was pronounced dead and attendance in Sunday school and worship really was dying off, homileticians wrote about the “shared sermon” and the “miracle of dialogue,” with books extolling the wonders of a new approach to preaching.¹² As Wes Allen notes, preachers expressed this dialogue in several different ways. Some preachers modeled a conversational style of preaching, even if no literal dialogue occurred.¹³ And there was the internal kind of dialogical preaching that arose in the early 1970s, first with inductive

approaches and later with narrative preaching.

But there were also numerous expressions of literal dialogue. Sometimes two preachers would engage each other while the congregation listened in. This dialogue between preachers was sometimes tightly scripted, at other times more of a dynamic give-and-take. And these older expressions of literal dialogue still occur. At the seminary where I teach, a co-pastor team of husband and wife engaged in a dialogue on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of full ordination for women in the United Methodist Church, an example of literal and deep dialogue to be sure.

At other times literal dialogue occurred when the preacher engaged a select group of laity in conversation about a sermon still in progress.¹⁴ I did this more than once in a pastorate, with the Wednesday night Bible study initiating the discussion of a text to be preached on the coming Sunday. The energy these folks brought not only to the mid-week discussion, but the preaching on Sunday, was amazing to witness. The sermon belonged to the community.

Forty years later dialogue preaching has popped up anew, again taking several distinct forms. In the Emerging Church some preachers rely so heavily upon the comments offered by parishioners that the sermon could go in any number of unanticipated directions (for example, Doug Pagitt at Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis, Minnesota), more of a study than sermon in the traditional sense of the word.¹⁵ A variation on that theme allows for congregational discussion even as the preacher moves toward a planned sermon focus (Tim Keel at Jacob's Well in Kansas City, Missouri, for instance).¹⁶ In other places, the preacher encourages comments and discussion after the preaching event, an open microphone approach for responding to the preached word (Paul Abernathy at St. Mark's Episcopal in Washington, D.C., is one example).¹⁷ While it takes a special kind of person to pull off the first type, the latter two have much for most preachers to consider.

When I attended Jacob's Well with my college-age daughter, we noted how the discussion encouraged listeners to share ideas, even as the preacher moved toward what seemed like a clearly planned destination. In fact, Tim Keel later told me that his style of dialogical preaching is more "teleological" than Doug Pagitt's. He also said that listeners can tell if a preacher is truly interested in their comments. Tim tries hard to listen closely when parishioners share, and as a result he often takes a detour on the way to his carefully planned focus. As for the content, the Sunday we were there he spoke on the lure of materialism in our culture even as he announced an alternative way to celebrate Advent and Christmas. His exegesis was also quite sophisticated. This was deep dialogue, sprinkled with bits of literal dialogue along the way.

I visited the early service at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Washington, D. C., the Sunday following the presidential elections of 2004. Judging from the conversations before worship, it was obvious that most of the parishioners present were in a state of despair, having hoped for a different electoral result. I had gone to St. Mark's because of the reputation of the church's senior minister, Paul Abernathy, but he was not there that Sunday. In his place there was a guest minister, Stephen Edmondson, a church history professor at Virginia Theological Seminary, who spoke from Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17, an apocalyptic passage driven by several pastoral issues on the mind of Paul. In addition to it being the first Sunday after the election, it was All Saints Sunday. And in addition to that, the church's Worship Task Force had been wrestling with how to respect the mysteries of the faith, even as two persons were being baptized

in that same mysterious faith at the later service. In other words, apart from the sermon conversation, the church's ongoing liturgical and social conversation was a richly textured one. Among other things, the preacher shared a story about St. Francis of Assisi and his care for the poor and dispossessed, which evidently spoke to several persons present.

The tradition at St. Mark's is for a congregational dialogue at the conclusion of the sermon, what they call "sermon seminar." The priest steps back from the pulpit, and open microphones among the congregation allow for different voices to be heard. On this particular Sunday several commented on the preacher's treatment of the lectionary reading as well as the St. Francis story, one person even adding another historical anecdote about the thirteenth century saint. And of course there were those who expressed their despair, even outrage, over the election results and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that would continue. For some of them the preacher had not been direct enough in that regard. They were hard on him even as they were supportive. At one point, he stepped back up to the pulpit and defended his approach to the subject, but not in a self-defensive manner. This was deep dialogue at its best, because as the preacher noted on the website posting, "This is an edited version of the sermon originally preached—it is closer to what was preached at 11:00 a.m. than at 9:00 a.m., after receiving much helpful editorial advice." The voice of a preacher was heard, but so were other voices—the text, the voices of systemic evil in our day, and the congregation's too.

Reflecting on that experience and the various types of literal dialogue available to preachers, I think about the heated conversation between Jesus and the Canaanite woman who comes to Jesus asking that he heal her daughter. She shouts at Jesus for mercy, and still he "did not answer her at all" (Matt. 15:22). The disciples, who apparently didn't do well in their pastoral care classes, tell Jesus she should be sent away. Jesus does not seem to come off much better when he finally says to her, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24). Despite his apparent exclusivity and his reference to feeding leftovers to dogs, she not only persists, but challenges his thoroughly Jewish theology. The exchange ends with him changing his mind as a result of her challenge. This is literal dialogue at its best, where even the preacher's theology can be challenged.

Conclusion

In his survey of what makes black preaching so powerful, Cleo LaRue claims that while narrowing it down is no easy task, it is not so much the literal dialogue in the form of call and response ("Help him, Jesus" uttered by the congregation or "Can I get a witness?" on the preacher's part), a trait that stands out for many casual observers, but the preacher's naming the plight of God's people, in the text and today.¹⁸ In other words, deep dialogue. This is what made the preaching of Martin Luther King, Jr. so powerful, not the rhetorical niceties ("Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today...") or refrains that live in our nation's collective memory ("I have a dream..." or "Let freedom ring..."), but the specific cries for justice in the face of rampant racism. Perhaps the combination of literal and deep dialogue is what makes black preaching such a powerful force.

What the church and the world desperately need at a time like ours is not merely a new technique for preaching; God knows homiletics has tried that kind of trick

before, but we might as well confess there are no sermonic shapes that can save us if our content is too shallow. Conversational style on the part of the preacher won't cut it, and neither will talk-back on the part of the congregation, even if such dialogue has its place. What we need is a conversation of substance, an authentic encounter with the complexities of the texts we preach and the scripts, another kind of text, by which people live their lives.

When a seminary student in Hebrew Bible class asked professor Brevard Childs what it would take to make an A on the next exegesis paper, the scholar's response was brilliant: "If you want to do better exegesis, become a deeper person."¹⁹ How profound! That is what the church needs, preachers of deeper depth who are willing to engage people at the depths of their existence as well. In a world of cacophony, the sermon is not an attempt to ignore life's many voices or silence them or speak louder than all of them, but to sound each of those voices fairly, all the while claiming by faith that there will be justice. Then at last we shall be able to proclaim with the psalmist,

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God. (Ps. 43:5)

Notes

1 George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 225.

2 On the idea of women's "voice" in preaching, see Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Hudson, *Saved from Silence: Finding Women's Voice in Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999).

3 Fred B. Craddock, *As One without Authority*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 46.

4 Brueggemann, "The Fearful Thirst for Dialogue," 73-75.

5 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985), vii-viii.

6 The lack of an introduction to Ps. 43, as well as the three-fold refrain bridging the two poems (42:5-6a; 42:11; and 43:5), point to a coherent structure, as nearly every scholarly study acknowledges. As for the internal structure of the psalm, see Luis Alonso Schökel, "The Poetic Structure of Psalm 42-43," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 1 (1976):4-11, and the accompanying responses by Martin Kessler and Nic. H. Ridderbos.

7 Claus Westermann, "From the Old Testament Text to the Sermon," *Review and Expositor* 72 (Spring 1975): 171, 176.

8 Brueggemann, "The Fearful Thirst for Dialogue," 85.

9 Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 33. See also the more recent work by David S. Cunningham, *Friday, Saturday, Sunday: Literary Meditations on Suffering, Death, and New Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

10 O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 14-15, 59-64.

11 Charles L. Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

12 William D. Thompson, *Dialogue Preaching: The Shared Sermon* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1969); Reuel L. Howe, *The Miracle of Dialogue* (New York: Seabury, 1963); and Idem, *Partners in Preaching: Clergy and Laity in Dialogue* (New York: Seabury, 1967).

13 Charles L. Rice, "A More-or-Less Historical Account of the Fairly Recent History of Narrative Preaching," in *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching?* ed. Mike Graves and David J. Schlafer (St. Louis: Chalice, 2008) 11-15, notes the conversational style of Lutheran preacher and homiletician Edmund Steimle on the radio program, "The Protestant Hour."

14 Allen, *The Homiletic of All Believers*, 6-15.

15 See Pagitt's *Preaching Re-Imagined* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). The church's website, which does not include audio files of sermons is: <http://www.solomonsporch.com/>.

16 See the church's website which includes MP3 audio files of recently preached sermons: <http://jacobsowellchurch.org/messages>.

17 The church's website for previously preached sermons is: <http://www.stmarks.net/worship/sermons.html>.

18 Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 13.

19 Cited in O. Wesley Allen, Jr., "Deeper Exegesis," unpublished papers of the 2004 Academy of Homiletics, 22.