

Preaching Spirituality

Reviews from The Vine

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Preaching Spirituality

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What does preaching have to do with spirituality? Preaching is talking to people. Spirituality is experiencing the sacred within, around and beyond us. Preaching depends on words. Spirituality needs silence as much as words; reflection and meditation as much as conversation and discussion. Preaching is an important part of worship and perhaps for us Presbyterians the central part of worship. Spirituality in the context of worship is more immediately linked to prayer and music, sharing the peace and the Lord's Supper.

Nonetheless, we Presbyterians have something significant to offer the wider Christian tradition in the area of spirituality through our attention to words and good preaching. The Protestant Reformation was a movement of the rebirth of

the word and preaching was restored to the centre of worship. Karl Barth was inspired by the Reformation to recognize the sacramental quality of the preached word. "God the Holy Spirit can transform ordinary words into the sacred Word communicated through preaching, whether the sermon is great or not, whether the listener is all there or not. God can work to transform heart and spirit through preaching, making Christ alive and 'contemporaneous'" (Kierkegaard).

Wow! Maybe this is hard to believe for some of us. For others of us, the experience of the sacred we Christians call God is something we have felt through particular sermons. Through words and the stirring within us, we have experienced conviction, remorse, forgiveness, empowerment,

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renewal and vision such that the perplexities within and around us have been engaged by the calling of God and the movement of the Holy Spirit.

But is there a way preaching can become more intentional in its relationship to spirituality? Is there a focus of attention in preaching that can nurture and ignite the spirit of listeners so that God is actually experienced, not just learned about? Yes there is. And to offer a little more here, let me say something about the language of preaching and about the content of preaching.

First, let us consider the language of preaching. In his book *The Contemplative Pastor*, Eugene Peterson discusses three kinds of languages people use, to which I would add a fourth. First, there is the language of information. We use this kind of language to pass on data about the who, what, where and how questions. This is language we use to tell about or describe something or someone. Second, there is the language of persuasion and motivation. This is language we use to try to get people to do things, believe things, commit to things, join things, make decisions and choices in a certain direction. Third, there is the language of intimacy. This is language we use to communicate love and feelings. It is personal language in the first and second person. Fourth, there is the language of evocation. This is language we use in poetry, music and prayer, language to inspire, open up the imagination to wonder, mystery, reverence, awe, gratitude, ecstasy, peace.

Now, think about the language in our world today and compare it to the language of preaching. In our world, the first two languages are, by far, the most predominant. We are inundated by the language of information and the language of motivation and persuasion. The languages of intimacy and evocation are left to the spheres of music, art and sexuality. In worship, however, and in effective preaching, the languages of intimacy and evocation must be primary. Certainly information is important, whether we are using an illustration or exegeting a passage of scripture. Certainly motivation and persuasion are important. The quality and skill of rhetoric makes a big difference in capturing people's attention and drawing them into a certain direction toward accepting the gospel call. But if we want preaching to cultivate and inspire a deeper experience of God, we must exercise the language of intimacy and evocation.

What we are "teaching" people in the act of preaching is not information, primarily. We are teaching them how to

pray. Certainly they need to learn something about prayer. Certainly they need to be motivated and persuaded. But even more, they need to be inspired, opened, convicted, and given language that can help them experience direct, personal connection with God and experience awe, wonder, grace, forgiveness and resurrection in the midst of life. While the Bible may contain language of information and persuasion, the primary language of scripture is that of intimacy and

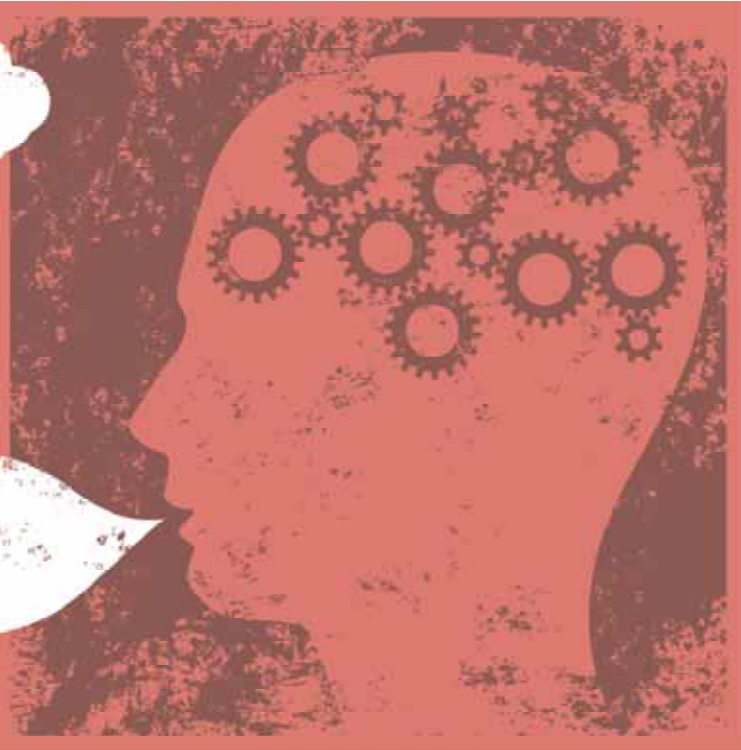


evocation. That should be the language of preaching as well if it is to be preaching spirituality.

Second, we need to think about the content of preaching. And by content, I don't mean information or data. Rather, is there a central metaphor, framework, structure or narrative that can help guide the preaching task through the scriptures to exposition and application? Many today are talking about the spiritual hunger that is out there in our world, but often not engaged effectively by the church. To express this hunger, many talk about life as a "journey." The historical sense (not only the history of the world - from the earth, to various species, to civilizations - but even our personal stories as individuals) is deeply ingrained in our wider culture.

It is fascinating that among ancient religions, perhaps Judeo-Christianity through its scriptures has the strongest sense of the historical. For Christians, we follow the story of Israel, culminating in the fullness of Christ, and open

ourselves to receive the call of Christ to follow him through our own life journey into the pattern of his death to resurrection. St. Augustine was one of the early pioneers of our tradition with his famous “Confessions” where he chronicles, in the form of a prayer to God, his life journey toward his final communion in God. Not only did the Reformers follow him closely in this regard, but our Puritan ancestors were steeped in the metaphor of the journey as a way of integrating the particular dots



of life lived before God (note the title of the most famous of Puritan spiritual manuals: *The Pilgrim's Progress*).

Preaching should have its eye on this metaphor of life as a journey and draw listeners into the metaphor regularly. Let me offer some thoughts on how this may be done more effectively, in a way true to our roots as Presbyterians. First, even though everyone today wants to talk about their story, the primary story we are telling in the content of preaching is the biblical story. What we have to do effectively is tell this story in such a way that listeners discern more clearly how their stories are connected to the biblical story. In his book *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*, N. T. Wright tells us that the authority of scripture rests not in its prescriptions, but in its grand narrative, inviting readers to be part of the

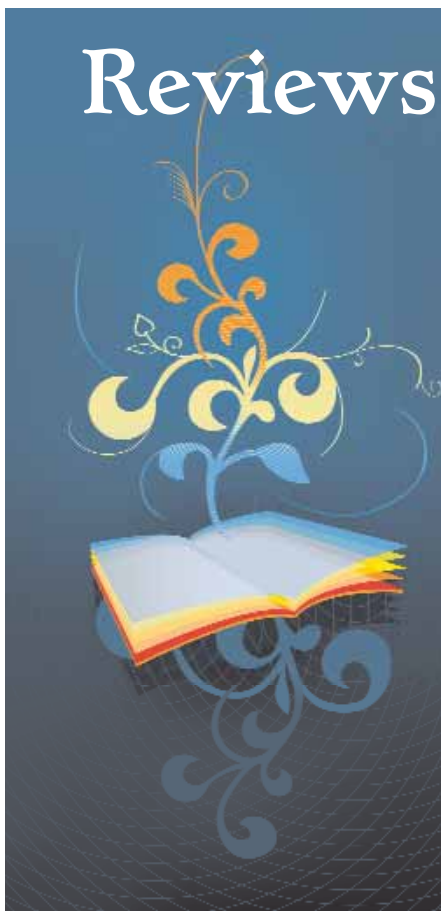
ongoing journey of God's creating us, coming to us and summoning us to implement through the Spirit what God in Christ has achieved in the cross and resurrection. We have to help listeners connect the dots of their own stories and everyday lives with the biblical story, culminating in the death and resurrection of Christ and spiritual birth of the church through his Spirit. How does a person's everyday mental, physical, financial, relational, public and private details of life suggest deeper discernment as to how God is calling to and working within them? Where are they called to deny themselves? Where is the cross confronting them? And where are they called to trust and to hope that God may be bringing them to new spaces of the promised land, new glimpses of resurrection?

Second, we are all confronted today in our North American context with an array of choices and decisions. We are inundated by data, from the frivolous and trivial to the graphically violent, sexual and painfully tragic. How can we discern a deeper template of moral, ethical and spiritual direction to help us navigate and make good choices and decisions, commitments that matter and public stands and ethical perspectives that bear witness to the kingdom of God in the midst of the kingdoms of death (Douglas Hall) all around us? The biblical story can ground our personal stories, as well as those of our congregations, providing us with greater perspective, deeper vision, clearer discernment, and new energies of conviction to bear witness and take a stand for what matters.

People in our pews are hungering for deeper spirituality. They are hungering for a word from the Lord. Our tradition places central importance and faith in the task of preaching within the worship of God. May such preaching become, through its use of language and content, an offering of humble gratitude and service to the God who has created, called, redeemed and will glorify us in the fellowship of a kingdom without end.

Harris Athanasiadis is the minister of St. Mark's Presbyterian Church in Toronto. He completed a Ph.D. at McGill in Systematic Theology and Spirituality in 1998. He has taught courses in Reformed Spirituality, Reformed Theology in Dialogue at Knox College and Canadian Contextual Theology at Emmanuel College. Harris is married to Pam McCarroll and between them they have four children. Harris enjoys family time, karate, music and reading challenging theology and good novels.

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If you and your church are looking for books that teach new spiritual rituals for prayer and reflection, you may wish to read these books.

Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life, by Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn and Matthew Linn (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1995).

Sleeping With Bread presents a contemporary version of the daily examen given by St. Ignatius in *The Spiritual Exercises*. Each day is to be ended with a five-minute reflection on the moments for which we are most grateful and least grateful that day. Ideas for the expansion of this ritual for family, group, annual, future and final reflection are included, mixed with a variety of stories and personal experiences resulting from the daily practice of examen.

Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God, by Sybil MacBeth (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007).

For those who are impatient pray-ers, think visually, or find themselves at a loss for words when they come to intercessory prayer, this practice of drawing or doodling while praying will expand and focus your prayer experiences. Step by step, you will be led through the practice of drawing your prayers and moving beyond mere words. MacBeth's work includes

additional resources for learning scripture, keeping Advent and Lent and practising lectio divina through this drawing practice. For children there is the simple book, *Praying in Color: Kid's Edition*, also by Sybil MacBeth.

Praying in Color: The workshop DVD, featuring Sybil MacBeth (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007).

This "how to" DVD has been prepared for people interested in leading a workshop on *Praying in Color*. It delivers a clear workshop outline with example clips from three workshops led by Sybil MacBeth.

Praying with the Body: Bringing the Psalms to Life, by Roy DeLeon (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2009).

As Presbyterians, we rarely engage our bodies when we pray. We might stand, sit or even kneel, but do not traditionally bring all of our physical selves into the ritual of prayer. This book gently pushes us to follow St. Benedict's example of including the body in prayer through the use of both Western and Eastern movement. Simple line drawings for postures accompany each of the psalm prayers along with notes for reflection, breathing and living your prayers. Psalm prayers for alleluia, sanctus and amen (morning, midday and evening) are included in this prayer journal.

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