

What to Preach?

The Challenge of the Jesus Seminar to Contemporary Homiletics

Prepared for the Westar Leaders Seminar

Fall 2005

John Shuck

In the January-February 2005 issue of *The Fourth R*, Robert Funk challenged the Westar Leaders Seminar to “creat[e] a new Sunday Morning experience from scratch: new music, new liturgy, new scriptures, new ceremonies, new rites of passage.” (p. 2)

I think this is a great idea. However, I am not sure if I am up to that task.

The reason for my reticence is that I am a minister in an established tradition that is loaded with a great deal of baggage. Starting from scratch is simply not going to happen unless I leave the church and start my own cult. Since I have chosen to remain in my tradition, I have to work with what is there and to facilitate change as best I can.

The task for me and perhaps for some others in the Westar Leaders Seminar is to do a great deal of deconstructing even as we reconstruct the Sunday Morning experience. Some of this deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction will result in reinterpreting old forms. I see this reinterpretation as temporary and transitional, making the paths straight for the new forms to come. On the other hand, some of the changes already taking place in many communities of faith are quite progressive. I am looking forward to Hal Taussig’s forthcoming book in which he surveys

over one thousand congregations that have employed new forms and structures in response to modern scholarship, our contemporary setting, and current religious/spiritual needs.

Robert Funk did not mention the role of preaching in this new Sunday Morning experience. For those of us in the Protestant tradition, preaching has traditionally been a very significant if not the most significant aspect of worship. To underscore this point, I offer three selections from the Presbyterian Church (USA) *Book of Confessions*.

From the Second Helvetic Confession:

THE PREACHING OF THE WORD OF GOD IS THE WORD OF GOD. Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful; and that neither any other Word of God is to be invented nor is to be expected from heaven: and that now the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; for even if he be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God remains still true and good. 5.004

From the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q. 83. What is the office of the keys?
A. The preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline. By these two means the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and shut against

unbelievers. 4.083

And from the Confession of 1967:

God instructs the church and equips it for mission through preaching and teaching. By these, when they are carried on in fidelity to the Scriptures and dependence upon the Holy Spirit, the people hear the word of God and accept and follow Christ. The message is addressed to men and women in particular situations. Therefore, effective preaching, teaching, and personal witness require disciplined study of both the Bible and the contemporary world. All acts of public worship should be conducive to people's hearing of the gospel in a particular time and place and responding with fitting obedience. 9.49

As you can see, preaching in my tradition comes with a lot of baggage! One of the tasks of the contemporary preacher who serves two masters (an ecclesiastical body and his/her own conscience) is to deconstruct and reconstruct in such a way that seeks to honor both masters (or at least seeks not to dishonor either master). Not easy. Jesus might say, impossible. Whether or not Jesus was exaggerating to make a point or speaking absolute truth is yet to be confirmed for me. At any rate, it is for those who have chosen to preach in the church that this paper is directed.

I cannot predict whether or not preaching will have a role in the new Sunday Morning experience. It certainly has a role at present. Because

preaching is so central to the Sunday Morning experience (formerly known as worship), I believe we need to address this question: What is the purpose of preaching? A second question is like it: What is the content of preaching? Here are some of my reflections regarding the purpose and content of preaching in response to the work of the Jesus Seminar.

Preaching and the “Word of God”

I believe that many clergy are overdue for a heart to heart with their congregations about the metaphor “Word of God” especially as it applies to the Bible. I have found that this metaphor more often stops creative thought than inspires it. The question we might ask our congregations is, “If the Bible is the Word of God, what makes it so?”

Modern scholarship has eroded the foundations for this metaphor. We have come to a time in which it is incredible to assert that our canon of scripture is objectively true or authoritative for all of humanity. Appeals to the Bible’s historical or scientific accuracy are naive. The claim that our canon has been dictated or inspired by supernatural revelation amounts to little more than special pleading. There is no magic power that makes the Bible or any text within it superior, truer, or more divinely inspired than any other human writing, religious or secular. The hands of human beings

through their own imaginative power made every jot and tittle of carving and of script. The Bible is a collection of the writings of humans for humans. Once we dismiss the assumption that our book or library of books is more authoritative than any other collection, we can finally take our seat around the table of humanity.

When faith communities begin demythologizing the Bible, some interesting things will happen. The Bible's authority will shift away from the text and toward the individual interpreter or community of interpreters. No longer will the Bible be considered an authoritative source of truth that contains infallible propositions about God or the human condition. Rather, it will become a resource for wisdom. Since authority is earned by the truth it tells, the Bible will have whatever authority the individual or community gives to it. People may find through its narratives, poetry, and song, an oasis of spiritual refreshment. Or they may not. It will be up to the people (both collectively and individually) to draw out what is meaningful and good and to discard what is not meaningful and good. The preacher's task will be to offer permission and encouragement for the congregation to engage in this discipline of freedom.

The preacher can no longer assume that within a biblical text is a Word from God that needs to be teased out through exegesis and delivered

to the waiting faithful. The preacher can no longer assume that just because a text is in the Bible that it is from God or is even valuable. A preacher can, however, provide information about a text using such tools as literary and historical criticism. The preacher can also provide an opinion regarding the text's value for the community of faith. The preacher may even use the text as an impetus to speak about a contemporary concern. But I believe it is unethical for a preacher to make the claim that what s/he is saying is true, good or of God because it is based on his or her interpretation of a biblical text. In other words, a preacher cannot use a biblical text to prove a point. Anything a preacher says must stand on its own terms. This ethic will free both the biblical text and the preacher. The text will be freed from the preacher's misuse of it. The preacher will be freed from the constraints of needing to "preach from the Bible" or to have everything s/he says to be backed by scripture.

Preaching can do a great deal of good in a community of faith. It can inspire, comfort, challenge, and inform for the betterment of humanity.

Preaching can also do a great deal of harm. The harm results not so much on the content of the message or its style of delivery as on the implied authority of the preacher because s/he supposedly preaches the Word of God. I believe that Word of God is not only a meaningless metaphor; it is

also a harmful metaphor for both the Bible and the preaching act. I recommend that preachers discontinue its use and have this conversation with their congregations.

What approach, lens, angle of vision, or metaphor might we take toward the Bible that will make it a helpful resource in the Sunday morning experience? I consider the Bible to be the family history of our spiritual ancestors. It is a collection of the record of human experiences canonized by various family historians. Our family history gives us rooted-ness. We have a story. We have a past. Our ancestors do have wisdom. I believe that they caught a glimpse of the fire. If we are wise, humble, and courageous, we can see that fire as well. It is out of respect for our ancestors, our need for rooted-ness, and our need to listen to the wisdom of the ancients that we “open and read.”

The advantage of this metaphor is that it allows us to appreciate that there are other families on this earth. They have family histories as well. Telling our stories to one another (without the competition about whose is more objectively authoritative) will enable us to engage more positively and peacefully with those of other faith traditions.

Also, family histories are never complete. Like the genealogist who discovers great Uncle Albert, who for some reason was not mentioned in the

family history, so too, scholars of Christian origins have found remnants of communities whose stories were not told, or at least told positively, in the canon of accepted lore. These “Uncle Alberts” include communities reflected in the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Mary* and numerous others. As we discover the great diversity of our Christian past, we who are charged with adding to the family history for our descendants, will now be obligated to include these voices as well.

Careful thought must be employed regarding the use of texts from the Bible and other non-canonical literature during the Sunday Morning experience. It would help level the playing field by not elevating the canonical literature over any other reading. Also, preachers must come clean with their congregants regarding the type of literature the text they have selected represents. Simply determining if it is history or fiction is a good start. Particularly with Jesus material, the preacher needs to be honest as to whether the material is historical, legendary or if it fits some other typology.

Preaching and the “Son of God”

The second heart to heart that preachers should have with their congregations is how the metaphor “Son of God” does or does not apply to

Jesus and what value, if any, this metaphor might have. This heart to heart will have direct relevance to the Sunday morning experience. In my tradition, the Revised Common Lectionary is all the rage. While the lectionary provides for rooted-ness and ecumenicity, it does not engage the modern world-view. The entire scheme from Advent to Christ the King Sunday reflects an ancient cosmology that is no longer credible. I have my doubts if it is even good for us ethically as it reinforces an otherworldly view of human hope, presents Jesus as a supernatural being, and confuses history with legend.

It is certainly possible to preach the Christ of the lectionary as a myth or an archetype (“Jesus is Son of God and so are you”). But it is important to be honest about what we are doing. I have endured the preaching of even seminary professors who know the difference between the Christ of mythology and the Jesus of history and yet do not come clean in their preaching. I believe this is intellectually dishonest and does a disservice to Jesus himself. If there ever was a guy who actually said and did some of the things historical scholars think he might have said and done, we owe it to him not to turn him into a god, or at least to be honest about it when we do.

I understand the reticence to give up on the Christ myth. It is hard to give up something that we cherish. When I first read Robert Funk’s *Honest*

to Jesus, I found myself in agreement with the core of what he said, but resistant to do anything about it. I felt that a “demoted” Jesus was flat. I needed the kerygma--the Christ myth. Within the last few years, I have changed. I now find the myth flat and the human Jesus invigorating.

When that which one cherishes no longer nourishes, it is time to part ways.

What is the essential content of preaching regarding Jesus? In my tradition the content of preaching goes something like this: we preach God reconciling the world to Godself through Jesus Christ crucified and risen. The metaphors for Jesus follow: Son of God, savior, firstborn of all creation, etc. In light of historical Jesus scholarship, one could preach this as mythology or archetype and separate the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. This was the neo-orthodox solution and the method I was taught in seminary. It didn't seem to work for me in practice. The subtleties of neo-orthodoxy never caught on in the church. The distinction between history and legend were not made clear. For many lay people, clergy, and some seminary professors, the Christ myth morphed into a quasi-historical reality. For instance, many in mainline churches still regard the resurrection as an historical fact or think they should if they want to be Christian. Under the banner of neo-orthodoxy, clergy never had to come clean. They could just “tell the Story” and not bother the poor parishioners with annoying details

like facts. Thanks to the Jesus Seminar, many of these parishioners' demands for honesty are being met.

Now, in light of the work of the Jesus Seminar, what is the content of preaching regarding Jesus? Certainly, the Christ-myth and its trappings cannot transfer to the historical Jesus. Jesus is no object of worship and none of the metaphors such as "Son of God" will fit. The preacher could preach the Christ-myth as a myth. For instance, the preacher could treat the myth as an archetype for the authentic human being. Paul Alan Laughlin explores a number of images of Jesus and Christ as possibilities for a future faith.¹ If this option is chosen, I think the preacher has an ethical responsibility to be clear that s/he is not speaking about an historical person.

The other option is to leave the Christ myth behind and focus on the historical Jesus. This is my personal preference as I find the historical Jesus much more interesting than any Christ myth. However, I realize that this is a preference and may relate to my spiritual or personality type. Others may respond positively to some form of the Christ of faith. I think that space needs to be made for that option as well.

But does the historical Jesus preach? How is this done? Much of the preaching regarding the historical Jesus will include a teaching element. Being honest with the congregation from the pulpit regarding modern

scholarship is a must. This does not require a lecture each Sunday. A few sentences to situate the text may be all that is needed. But preaching is more than teaching. Preaching also inspires. It motivates and touches the heart. The historical Jesus certainly does that. This past year I preached on the 23 parables awarded either a red or pink vote by the Jesus Seminar. This was my temporary canon. The discipline of doing this with the congregation has introduced us to a Jesus (and the divine realm to which he pointed) that is relevant to our modern experience. His parables invited us to consider the most important aspects of our humanity.

I am currently in the process of creating a lectionary of red and pink sayings and deeds. On Sunday morning, I come clean about what we are reading in the bulletin. I simply label the saying as “A Teaching from Jesus” or “An Act of Jesus” and cite the sources. If I include a reading that reflects the Post-Easter Jesus, to use Marcus Borg’s phrase, I tell the congregation that. To do so is nothing more than to be honest with oneself and with the congregation about the type of literature that is in front of us.

Preaching and the “Kingdom of God”

So, then, what does the preacher say on Sunday? Where does s/he begin? What is the point of the Sunday morning experience? I am

beginning to see where I do not want to go, but I am not quite sure as to where I do want to go. Perhaps we do not need a definitive answer just yet. Creating new orthodoxies and new canons is no more appealing than retreating into old ones. One place to begin is to tell the truth to our congregations about our dilemma. This removes the burden from the preacher of being the know-it-all, for pretending that s/he is preaching the “word of God”, or from behaving in other co-dependant ways with her/his congregation. People need and demand honesty. After millennia of the church doing the thinking for the people, I have found that congregations need “permission” to think for themselves and to make decisions about what they can and cannot believe. It is the responsibility of the preacher to be honest with the information that is available in regards to scholarship, Christian origins, Jesus, and the development of the creeds and canons. Freedom follows honesty. This freedom allows the community to be an active participant in determining what to do with this information.

There is yet something more to the preaching experience. It is an art. It has power. It can be a positive means for transformation. In defining a new purpose for preaching, we may be able to reinterpret its traditional purpose in a new way. Soteriology has been the guiding force behind preaching. Preachers preached so that people might believe the gospel and

be saved. Through preaching people might enter the kingdom of God (*basileia tou theou*). A guiding metaphor for preachers and preaching still may be the *basileia tou theou* (translate that as you wish). Thanks to the Jesus Seminar and its reconstruction of the voice print of the historical Jesus, we have a broader vision for this concept. We also have a model in Jesus of how to approach it. Jesus preached about the *basileia tou theou*. If it was enough for him, might it be enough for us?

What is this *basileia tou theou*? If the historical Jesus is our guide, it is not an otherworldly home in the sky. Our modern experience is showing us that human beings are earthlings born of the earth and from the earth. To the earth we shall return. Heaven and hell as ultimate reward and punishment must be buried with our superstitious past. Our modern consciousness has brought the Bible, Jesus and the kingdom of God down to earth. What is the *basileia tou theou*? It is a mustard seed. And it isn't. Exploring that mystery, that metaphor that I think points to something very real, should keep preachers and communities of faith busy for quite some time.

The content of Christian preaching, then, is not the mythical Christ, nor the historical Jesus, nor the Bible, nor even God, but the *basileia tou theou*. The art of preaching will ignite the imagination, spur freedom,

inspire creation of meaning, and foster a spirit of care taking among those who hear our words. Ultimately, the purpose of preaching is to encourage people to awaken to and to participate in this mystery of the *basileia tou theou*. By participate I mean to be awed, disturbed, overjoyed, puzzled, saddened, hungry, filled, shaken, comforted, transformed, and blessed. Jesus is a guide, a pointer, a teacher, a fellow seeker, and a preacher. It is pretty simple, really. I believe that in the church of the future, that is now breaking into the present, preachers, like Jesus before us, will have but one task: to consider with others the mystery of the *basileia tou theou* and in considering find life.

¹ Laughlin, Paul Alan, “The Once and Future Christ of Faith” *The Fourth R*, March-April 2005.
