

# Introduction

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Every book has its backstory. It can be difficult to pinpoint where that backstory begins; but it is safe to say that this one began in an e-mail exchange. Picture two preacher-homileticians hammering on their computer keyboards in offices some 150 yards apart on an East Coast seminary campus: “We could do this—a new textbook” // “right—tapping into our traditions, Baptist-Pentecostal/Reformed—and crossing race and gender too” // “for changing classroom demographic?” // “right!” // “Spirit-driven” // “yes” // “you serious?” // “of course.”

Such exchanges formed part of a larger web of animated dialogue about the changing realities in church and theological education, the increasing diversity of our classrooms, and our search for tools to help us train a rising generation of preachers who would be capable of meeting a future whose contours we weren’t able to spell out for them exactly, but which would clearly be diverse religiously, culturally, and ethnically, both inside and outside the church. We

wanted to help students take varied contexts seriously as they were formed as leaders.

What anchored these conversations were some deep, shared convictions. Both of us believed strongly (and still do) that Christian preachers dare to dance on the grave of despair and sing in the domains of death in the name of Jesus Christ, crucified God-with-us and firstborn of God's new creation. Beyond that, we had both published work expressing our respective, gut-deep convictions that any preacher or Christian community that hopes to bear fitting witness to the yearning of divine love over the world must learn the language of lament—a language we learn from the Spirit herself.

As fate or providence would have it, we further discovered that our sense of what is at stake in preaching had been shaped by a specific experience etched deeply in each of our memories—a scene that had played out differently in detail, but with similar impact. We had each found ourselves, still in our thirties, standing shoulder to shoulder with parents committing the unthinkable act of burying their greatest treasure—their child. For each of us, this was an experience that marked the depth of despair and tear-stained rage to which Christian preaching must answer. Lowering a small coffin into the ground has a way of sharpening your senses: you hear the groans of the Spirit everywhere. Now, silent news footage of listless refugees waiting for help under a blazing sun has a soundtrack: you can hear the moan of the wind that's blowing dust in their eyes. Or you open the newspaper to yet another photo of an urban mother clutching the junior-high photo of her teenage boy who is no more, his life an unfinished sentence that ended with a pistol shot: the keening grief of thousands of bereaved mothers rises off the silent page. To these groans of the Spirit are added the sighs of deforested Central American mountainsides where dense rainforests—the air-purifying “lungs” of the planet—once stood. The Spirit's groans hollow you out

some days. Into those hollow places rushes an evermore intense hope in God's just and righteous future yet to come.

We also share a common vision of theological education as increasingly being an arena where diverse, historic Christian traditions will need to draw strength from each other, be mutually tested and stretched, and give birth to new hybrid languages of lament and hope adequate to our time. Theological education will need to animate new, prophetic practices to challenge the forces of runaway classism, racism, and sheer indifference that cause human beings to withdraw into polarized, sometimes literally armed, camps of suspicion and callous self-interest.

Yet, for all our common concerns, we two preacher-homileticians are different. One is black, the other white. We are of different gender and different age. One was nurtured in the free-church tradition of Pentecostalism and ordained Baptist, whose worship practices lay full claim to the body and voice of not only the preacher but every member of the congregation. The other was raised in the mainline, North American Presbyterian branch of the Reformed tradition—a worship tradition that associates a stone-still body with attentiveness to the presence of the Lord (a concept many Presbyterian eight-year-olds have found mind-boggling). Each of us has had the privilege of spending significant time in worshiping traditions more like that of the other. We've been welcomed there. We have experienced the death-defying power of the Spirit in settings that were not our natural liturgical habitat, reminding us that the Spirit is always on the loose, not constrained by any one tradition.

Finally, we are both preachers and teachers of preaching. Our perspectives on the field of homiletics are stereoscopic; and this has improved our vision. We divided up most of the chapters of this book according to our areas of strength and experience instead of trying to

write each chapter together. We trust one another's voices, which are different.

A feature of this book is that in each of the singly-authored chapters (chapters 2 through 10), readers will find "sidebars" in which the other writer reflects on a key point under discussion. Our hope is that the implicitly dialogical nature of this book will evoke, in turn, energetic dialogue among its readers, whether in classrooms or preachers' workgroups. Out of such invested and open conversation may come the hybrid shapes, sounds, and theological frameworks for preaching that will equip the present and future church to bear courageous witness to the work of God in a changing world, one charged with tension, yet full of redemptive possibility.

### **And Now, a Word from the Manufacturers . . .**

These days, every new product comes with a label full of fine print. Whether it's a new treatment for hair loss, a three-wheeler for your nephew (assembly required), or the new Weedwacker you are hoping will outperform the other half dozen you've thrown away in disgust, the fine-print information is always important. It tells you what to expect: "This is what this item can do, this is how *not* to use it ('don't try this at home')." It seems only fair for the authors of a preaching textbook to fall in line and put the "fine print" up front.

First, this book cannot teach you to preach, nor is it intended to. What it *is* intended to do is to accompany you on a journey of learning-by-doing. We take the view here that preaching is an event, not a static object. A written sermon is an artifact, marks on a page that point to an event of sound and bodily gesture. Preaching itself is embodied, vocalized, actively received, here-and-now witness to the ongoing work of God in the world. The purpose of this book is to construct different vantage points—theological, contextual,

historical, and so on—from which you can critically reflect on just such embodied events of speaking and hearing—your own, and the preaching of others. The aim of this back-and-forth between the act of preaching and critical reflection upon it is to become more attuned to the Spirit, more adept in preaching's component skills, and more self-aware about all that is at stake in proclaiming the redemptive work of God.

First, a word on what we mean by “critical reflection.” To be clear, “critical” reflection does not mean that one's aim is to identify everything that's wrong with the way someone preaches, or to beat down all views of preaching except one's own. Critical reflection is part of any practice-based learning process. Reflecting critically on preaching means taking a deliberate step back to try to understand better a particular sermon event—our own, or that of another preacher. Typically, we evaluate preaching events in relation to particular criteria (theological, interpretive, contextual-rhetorical, and so on) that are agreed upon by the learning community involved. Although critical reflection will reveal flaws or raise questions, it can just as easily foreground strengths in a preaching event, and its ultimate aim is to always build up the preacher, whether the feedback is positive or negative. Within the increasingly diverse preaching classrooms or preachers' peer groups for which this book is intended, critical reflection undertaken in company with other preachers can help us consider preaching from completely new perspectives.

A second “fine-print” assumption that we make in these pages is that preaching is best learned in some kind of group environment, whether physical or virtual (Internet-based). Many who pick up this book will be learning to preach with other relatively new preachers. You may be in a physical space with the rest of the class, or yours may be a virtual classroom you enter periodically to meet with the rest of the community. Regardless, we see this book functioning best

when put to work in relation to a fundamentally *interactive* process of learning, whether you are just starting out in preaching or have done it for years.

You may be a working preacher who has picked up this book because you hope to create higher-quality sermons and preach them better. To make the learning process even more effective, consider working your way through this book in company with a small group of other preachers who've committed themselves to mutual support, honest critique, and unflagging encouragement in the work of preaching.<sup>1</sup> Nothing is more valuable than the informed feedback of other preachers. Using a shared set of criteria, such a learning community can surface insights that may never come up in the brief remarks, appreciative or critical, that listeners typically offer after a worship service. At the very least, a preacher reading this book on her own can invite at least one other preacher to read it, too, and commit to a couple of meetings (in shared physical or space) for conversation. Listening to sermons together and evaluating them can be an invaluable exercise.

A third “fine-print” assumption of this book is that we envision your classroom as a place far more diverse than classrooms of even ten or fifteen years ago. Some diversities will be obvious—denominational differences, gender difference, different ethnicities and first languages, along with cultural and generational differences. Other dimensions of difference may be less obvious but will have an impact on what goes on in the classroom, such as different theological viewpoints related to the practice of preaching or its content, or

1. Research conducted by the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Peer Learning Project has shown that preachers who work in committed peer-learning groups with fellow pastors, setting shared goals and achieving them, are more satisfied with their own preaching, as are their congregations. Being committed to shared learning in ministry also correlates with more enduring and satisfying ministry careers. See Penny Long Marler et al., *So Much Better: How Thousands of Pastors Help Each Other Thrive* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2013), 6–9.

the varied worship styles that members of the class prefer or believe are most valid. Not least of all, learners differ in what they consider strengths in a sermon—a matter largely influenced by the specific faith-forming contexts where they have spent significant time. Such dimensions of ordinary life as sexual orientation or political views and affiliations can also affect a learning community.

We are convinced that diversities matter. The increasing diversity in today's preaching classrooms is a gift, not a problem, a beautiful blessing, not a burden. Diversities press us to become more self-aware, challenging us to welcome into our experience persons and perspectives distinctly "other" from ourselves. We have made an effort to keep the diversities that are present in any preaching classroom or learning community in the forefront of our thinking as we've written this book. A community of preachers, novice or seasoned, that gets past surface talk will discover differences among them of all kinds. They will differ in their convictions about preaching—what it is, what it is meant to do, and what makes it excellent.

Differences of opinion in relation to preaching, a practice deeply rooted in distinctive traditions, can run deep. Difference typically produces tension. This tension has potential to "break" either of two ways. If "different" is always presumed to align with "wrong" or "lesser," it becomes the source of mutual distrust, increasing self-protectiveness, and disengagement. In a learning community, especially a preaching community, difference can lead to a closed, dismissive attitude toward styles of preaching other than one's own. Yet, if we can maintain open-minded curiosity about the differences that surface in our classrooms and preachers' learning groups, these diversities become opportunities to enlarge our view of the world and the endless variety of the Spirit's ways with the saving word. Practicing openness of heart and mind to the vast variety within

Christ's church makes better preachers, pastors, and citizens out of us in a world that summons us to live and work in close quarters with those we experience as "other." Until we recognize the "other"—the one who is religiously, culturally, socially, and politically different from oneself—as brother/sister and, indeed, *teacher* and companion on the way, we will miss the presence of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the circumstances in which you are developing your preaching skills, this book assumes that real learning happens for preachers when (1) they keep preaching, and (2) they discipline themselves to be self-aware about their work, stepping back from time to time and submitting it to their own critical assessments and those of others different from themselves.

Learning to preach is an open-ended process. Neither of us has ever met a good preacher who thought he or she had nothing further to learn. We ourselves continue to learn. Among our teachers are the everyday folks in the pews; we hope that they, too, will be a resource for you. Some days, listeners will embrace you; other days, you'll just feel grateful that they continue to put up with you. Then there are moments, if mutual trust is strong between pulpit and pew, when a listener will be constructively critical, letting you know where a move in the sermon left them feeling marginalized. Precious are those listeners who bring such gifts of honesty and constructive engagement.

But there will also come a time (by grace!) when a listener looks you in the eye and testifies that while you were preaching, they heard not only *your* voice, but the speaking of Another. We are not alone in the pulpit—ever. Preacher and listeners find themselves on holy ground. The Spirit moves in the assembly, restoring vision,

2. The homiletical approach of John S. McClure is notable for its insistence that positioning oneself before "the other" in receptivity and humility is essential for preaching constructively amid the conditions of postmodernity. See McClure, *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001).



restoring hope. But the power of the Spirit cannot be confined to the sanctuary. The Holy Breath moves into the streets, teaching every believer to bear witness there in word and deed that—even *here*, even *now*—God is making all things new.

### Structure of the Book

With these convictions guiding us, we have structured this book in the following manner. Rather than diving immediately into the nuts and bolts of sermon development, we begin with thinking about the theological and rhetorical nature of preaching. Chapter 1 posits preaching as a Spirit-animated event. We consider preaching as a rhetorical act guided by theological convictions rooted in the promises of God. Chapter 2 goes deeper into the Spirit-driven theology of preaching underlying our approach to preaching. Along the way, we invite readers to examine the theologies *of* preaching and *in* preaching that they have internalized, and which will be at play as they learn the skills of preaching.

Having clarified our pneumatological (Spirit-driven) theological lens in chapters 1 and 2 we turn in chapter 3 to the importance of a life of prayer for preaching, a topic that grows out of our pneumatological starting point, one we believe sometimes suffers neglect in preaching classrooms. This leads to reflection in chapter 4 on preaching as an act of worship. Chapters 5 through 8 deal with the traditional tasks and skills of preaching, from the study of biblical text and context to sermon design and performance. Chapter 5 helps readers understand their role as interpreters of Word and world, texts and contexts, including the congregation itself. Chapter 6 maps a method for the study of Scripture for preaching (also known as exegesis), beginning with a contemporized version of the ancient practice of *lectio divina*, a prayerful engagement with one's chosen

preaching text. Chapter 7 presents different ways to move from exegetical study to sermon design, exploring different sermon forms. Yet sermons are not ideas arranged on a page. As living events of Spirit-inspired embodied communication, sermons must *take* form through being *performed* by a human body. Chapter 8 takes a closer look at sermon delivery through human voice and body.

Chapter 9 moves beyond the body to discuss the challenges and opportunities of the relationship between preaching and technology, especially in our digital age. Chapter 10 explores ways that preaching forms Christians to live faithfully in the world, revealing our conviction that the Spirit's work in and through preaching is not limited to the interior of a church building.

Spirit-animated preaching engages the life of individuals, communities, and wider society. Such preaching has centripetal and centrifugal power, shaping both speakers and hearers as agents of witness in the wider world. There, the Spirit is on the loose, blowing where She wills. Our hope is that the sound of this Holy, world-transforming Wind will accompany you as you read these pages and make the practices of preaching your own.