

Tacked on my office door is a Calvin and Hobbes comic strip. The teacher inquires, “Are there any questions?” Calvin’s hand shoots up: “What is the meaning of life?” After the teacher, preferring geography as her subject, waves off his inquiry, Calvin mutters, “I’d really like to get my question settled before I spend any more time on this stuff.”

Is This Sermon Interesting?

What if the preacher asked, two minutes into the sermon, “Are there any questions?” Would that there were only one or two questions! Count heads in the pews, factor out about one-third (for those who are handing a crayon to their daughters, or hunting for a Tylenol to cope with the previous night’s revelry) who don’t have any question at all on their minds and you’ll arrive at a probable number. Undoubtedly, every one of them is wondering something like, “How long will this last? Will it be boring?”

Varieties of Questions

I have a hunch this line of inquiry is more important than we’d like to allow, and we’ll return to the issue in a moment. For now we need to acknowledge the many questions parishioners harbor, which are all over the ballpark, startlingly diverse, even painfully incompatible.

You try to voice a prophetic word to rally the troops to eradicate racism, but you turn and see the man whose wife was just diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

You reach for words to comfort the afflicted, but then you spot the drowsily comfortable, who need to be afflicted with some kind of homiletical shock treatment.

You urge the ungrateful to give thanks and sense the goodness of God, but your eye falls on the woman you know has a hard time thinking of a decent reason to get out of bed in the morning.

You notice a man leaning forward, intrigued, but the guy behind him is checking his watch.

The questions vary from person to person. The questions vary within a single

Truth is interesting...
God’s Word is *fascinating*...
Trust your material!



person’s mind over time. So what is the preacher to do? The easiest answer is to let the text raise its own questions. Undoubtedly people walk in the door with questions that may not be the noblest or healthiest, and part of our task as pastors is to reframe the world so that people learn to ask the right questions, questions that, in fact, lead us somewhere. Many worshipers expect us to do no less, and are well prepared to be subjected to our probing diagnosis and prescribed regimen toward a renewed life in Christ.

But we dare not fall back on an autocratic stance with God’s Word, as if our mandate is to toss down thunderbolts of

the Word that strike wherever they may. As Tom Long once said in a lecture, preaching is not always like lightning striking. Preaching may also be like a dinner conversation, where we gather and discuss, share, question, respond. In our culture in which whatever authority the church once wielded has evaporated, we must be humble, indirect, tantalizing, respectful.

We yearn for all their questions to be profound—and many are. Along with Karl Barth, a few are scratching their heads and wondering, “Is it true?” Most certainly, quite a few are darkly questioning how to make sense out of suffering—if there is a God. And this question is never merely

RHETORIC & THE ART OF PREACHING



For most people, rhetoric is a dubious term at best. Whenever they see the word, they expected it to be preceded by something like

“empty” or “mere.” They view rhetoric as being what happens when people want their hearers to believe them and they don’t care whether what they say is right or wrong, true or false. The ancient practice of rhetoric, however, wasn’t about slick speech designed to convince or persuade; it was about connecting with one’s hearers. It was the recognition that, not only what one says, but also who one is, where one is speaking, and those to whom one speaks, are crucial ingredients of getting the message across. If a speaker does not understand these factors, then the power and effectiveness of what he or she says is diminished.

In *Connecting with the Congregation*, Lucy Hogan and Robert Reid use the time-established principles of rhetoric to help preachers better connect with their congregations.

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intellectual: every Sunday we preach to real people who have cancer, who loved somebody who recently was killed, who have been betrayed by a spouse—and the acid test of preaching, I think, is how sensitively yet profoundly we deal with the problem of suffering.

Irrationality in the Pews

Not all questions are so poignant. Many are annoyingly banal. Instead of asking of the gospel, “Is it true?” we all have a handful of amateur theologians, spiritual denizens who grade the preacher, basically asking, “Is he right?” They have God all figured out, their dogma mastered long ago. Armed with Bible verses and catchy quotes from grinning, spiritual writers you detest, they nod in beaming agreement on those rare occasions that you get it right, and wring their hands in anxiety when you veer from the narrow path of their orthodoxy, which God seems to have appointed them to defend at your expense.

Worshippers, to a person, walk in the door with some theology. We never preach to a blank slate, but to minds that have been scribbled on all week. The dogmatic titans are easier to recognize in a way, for we know something of their theological viewpoint. But modern-day people bring with them all kinds of spiritualities they have picked up at work, from television, on the Internet, off the bookshelves. We are wrong to suppose that people are either some brand of Christian or not religious at all. Wendy Kaminer’s book, *Sleeping with Extra-terrestrials: The Rise of Irrationalism and Perils of Piety* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), should be required reading for every preacher. She demonstrates how Americans are very spiritual indeed, indulging in an extravagant smorgasbord of supernatural phenomena. Startlingly high percentages of people believe in ESP, psychic healing, UFOs, astrology, alien abductions, channeling, and reincarnation. Among those who listen to preaching, more have read *The Celestine Prophecy* or *Conversations with God* than perhaps even the Bible itself. Those to whom we preach are not too skeptical when it comes to religion; rather, they are too gullible.

One of my most intelligent, educated, successful members popped into my office one day, wide-eyed, handing me a book detailing how there is a tenth planet, which scientists have failed to detect, that

will pass perilously close to Earth in just a few weeks, causing catastrophic destruction. The source of this knowledge? The Bible (naturally) and some Akkadian tablets from Ur, Abraham’s homeland. A schoolteacher once asked me, “Will you ever talk to us about your past lives?” Note the plural. At an afternoon vesper service, light from the stained-glass window settled on my head, leading a couple (some deity gave them both the same revelation simultaneously) to hug me afterward, saying God’s spirit was heavily upon me, and through that spirit God told them to sell their home and move to Colorado.

Celebrities are the new authorities in things religious, from Shirley MacLaine to Demi Moore to Della Reese (who plays an angel on television); celebrities become virtual divinities, from Princess Di to Oprah to Dale Earnhardt. Self-protection or self-indulgence is at the heart of most religious fads, and we must admit up front that ours is not an easy religiosity that pleases base fancies. Deepak Chopra (in *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*) promises to lead us to a land “where old age, infirmity, and death do not exist and are not even entertained as a possibility,” while our gospel demands we give up everything to follow the Crucified.

A few clergy become celebrities, but most do not. While many people are gullible regarding the personal experience of a movie star, they are cynical about the clergy. So many men of the cloth have behaved so foolishly, with such embarrassing publicity, that every week we must preach to some number of people whose cynical question is, “When is the preacher going to try to reach into my wallet?”

Is This Sermon Interesting?

With such a thicket of crazed questions growing unchecked about the sanctuary, what is the preacher to do? I believe our greatest hope is related to the one question I believe every worshiper brings in the door, no matter what has been suffered in the past week, no matter what celebrity has been ogled the day before, no matter the mood of the day. And that question is: Is the preacher interesting? Or perhaps it’s the flip side question: Is the preacher boring?

How would the preacher know? People talk among themselves on this subject constantly. But to us they say nothing. All we have to go on is body language, a fidget,

checking the watch, a stifled yawn—or, more hopefully, a furrowed brow, leaning forward, being very still.

Superficially, we may say “How trifling!” to put much weight on whether the sermon is interesting. But this is no small thing. At some level, truth (if it’s worthy of the name) is interesting. God’s Word (if the sermon is, in fact, something so daring and highfalutin) is fascinating, more fascinating than the endless stream of words that bombard us daily. Words are cheap, relatively hollow, and there are so many of them out there. Even when words gamely try to speak to the soul, they falter when they are not really true, when they are not God’s Word. The pablum dished out by Chopra and Oprah is too trivial to be true. And therefore this pablum is, as the day wears on, boring, unsatisfying.

Our sensual, rapid, titillating culture suffers from some ennui, a profound malaise (so puzzling and surreal is this mood that we reach for a foreign word like ennui or malaise to describe it). We are deluged with too many parochial words, so much gibberish, one banal notion followed by another silly idea, trendy fads of no substance at all.

In the marrow of modernity’s soul there is a gnawing boredom. Georges Bernanos began his *Diary of a Country Priest* by noticing that “my parish is bored stiff . . . eaten up by boredom. You can’t see it all at once. It is like dust. You go about and never notice, you breathe it in, you eat and drink it. It is sifted so fine, it doesn’t even grit on your teeth. But stand still for an instant and there it is, coating your face and hands. To shake off this drizzle of ashes you must be forever on the go.”

And so we are. We (those to whom we preach, and we the preachers) cram our schedules full and rush headlong from one stimulating experience to another, even turning worship itself into yet one more emotional “upper”—not because there are so many fascinating things to do, but because we are fundamentally bored, and were we to stand still, the dust of boredom would choke us.

So the question “Is the sermon interesting?” is no small thing. The confusion sets in when we settle for a merely “entertaining” flourish, a couple of quaint tales

woven between a joke and a popular lyric. Preaching is not one more venue in the entertainment industry. Rather, our task is to dare to shake off the drizzle of boredom, catch people in those few moments they are not on the go, and say something interesting. To do so requires not that we be silver-tongued, but rather that we trust the inherent fascination of the gospel, plainly

ture. We need not strap ourselves in and counsel avoidance. Rather, we play the song, we trust its haunting, peculiar melody, we relish the music ourselves, and then we look up, surprised to notice the rowers are intrigued, interested enough to hear more, all the while rowing toward safety and freedom.

Everything is at stake in how we deal with the sirens of our culture.

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spoken. Trust your material! We do not have to make the gospel interesting; it just is. We need no brilliant hermeneutical gyrations to make the gospel relevant; it just is. We are not required to prop up the gospel, pleading that it is not boring; the gospel is not boring. The gospel, at the end of the day, is the only interesting game in town.

Martin Luther King Jr. once preached a sermon entitled “How a Christian Overcomes Evil,” punctuated by an illustration from mythology. The sirens sang seductive songs that lured sailors into shipwreck. Two men navigated those treacherous waters successfully—and King contrasted their techniques. Ulysses stuffed wax into the ears of his rowers and strapped himself to the mast of the ship, and by dint of will managed to steer clear of the shoals. But Orpheus, as his ship drew near, simply pulled out his lyre and played a song more beautiful than that of the sirens, so his sailors listened to him instead of to them. Everything is at stake in how we deal with the sirens of our cul-

said that Winston Churchill, before standing in front of Parliament, rehearsed his speeches in front of a full-length mirror—and in the nude. Preachers (and here I prefer the wearing of clothes) should do no less to try, given their God-given gifts and limitations, to be as interesting as possible in terms of presentation.

We know the legends of preaching, and they may not inspire us so much as dwarf our puny efforts. Twenty thousand people pressed onto Boston Common to hear George Whitefield; even cynical old Benjamin Franklin admitted that, on hearing the “grand itinerant,” he emptied his pockets. John Chrysostom, with piercing eyes and penetrating voice, preached brilliantly and even irritatingly on the moral claims of scripture. Mesmerized audiences burst into thunderous applause, riots broke out, and he was forced into exile in Armenia. Frederick Douglass was so awestruck by Sojourner Truth that he stammered, “We were all for a moment brought to a standstill, just as

How to Be More Interesting

Now, this notion of being interesting conjures up some of the preacher’s worst fears. We have all seen the scintillating raconteur who leaves the audience spellbound, but with something less than (or different from) the gospel. Being interesting isn’t entirely about rhetorical aplomb. God knows, we need to practice and improve on our dramatic presentation, pressing after just the right timbre of voice, the perfect gesture, the unbearably provocative pause, the raised eyebrow. Preaching is too often taught in a way that produces solid exegesis on the printed page, but not often enough in a manner that invites the preacher to be more of an actor. It is

we should have been if someone had thrown a brick through the window.”

But to be interesting, you do not have to be Chrysostom or Whitefield or Truth. You need not have the frenetic energy of Dick Vitale, the poetic artistry of Maya Angelou, the wicked humor of George Carlin, the achy charisma of Sarah McLachlan, or the booming resonance of James Earl Jones. Plain truth, simply spoken, is fascinating, and often in a way that can be obscured by frenetic energy, humor, poetry, and resonance. To be interesting, we give voice to material that we know is more interesting than we will ever be. To be interesting, we figure out people’s issues, their hot buttons, what they most certainly are interested in. Talk about sex. Talk about getting rich. Talk about marital breakdown. The Bible talks constantly about these matters! But absolutely refrain from talking about these subjects in tired, worn-out, predictable ways, or in a fashion that casts you as a conservative or liberal pawn. People disagree on these matters, and we must model that disagreement in our sermons. We must carry on both sides of a dialogue so that in the end people have heard something fresh; they have had the issue reframed, but they are positive that you understand their struggles and dilemmas.

I overheard an exchange that was a bit impolite, but revealing. Student asks professor: “How can I preach more interesting sermons?” Professor answers: “Get a more interesting life.” Get out from behind the desk, go bowling, hang out with strangers, surf the Internet, try foreign food. The more the preacher is immersed in the life of the world, the more the sermon will be able to make that unfailingly intriguing connection between the gospel and real life. If you get bored at a movie, or by cocktail-party conversation, then good! You’re on your way to preaching a sermon that is, by comparison, titillating.

The interesting preacher is well

immersed in this world, yet gives clear (even if subtle) evidence of having withdrawn and reflected upon the world, and upon the things of God. The preacher’s task (or privilege) is to live fully in the world, but in a manner that reflects subtly and yet seductively that we have indulged in prayer and reflection, that we have spent time apart from the world with God, so that we comprehend how

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God is present in the realities of the real world, how God is manifest where our parishioners live when they are out in the parish. By our rhythm of immersion and withdrawal, and by our honesty in telling about it, we draw those who are watching toward a vantage point where they too may discover God in their lives, and realize that their lives are immersed in God.

Study and creativity, stirred vigorously, have some alchemy that explodes into an interesting sermon. The more deeply we study the text, the more provocatively we question the text (and let ourselves be interrogated by the text), the more interesting stuff we uncover. Flat-footed exegesis is boring; pedantry puts people to sleep. An unleashed, practiced imagination can take listeners to unvisited places with a text they’ve heard a hundred times. Brevity may help. Never, ever risk talking three seconds beyond the point that a distracted person would be inclined to check his or her watch.

Experienced by Deeds

And be very sure: how you live your life matters. If you lead an interesting life, if you are out there with people, if you avoid being stuffy, if you can laugh, if you are first to the homeless shelter and the last to leave the potato gleaning, if you show up when people are hurting, if you applaud loudly for the teenager who scores a basket, you exponentially increase people’s interest in what you have to say. Giovanni

di Ceprano, one of the first biographers of Saint Francis, said this about the little man from Assisi: “Not with enticing words of human wisdom, but in the doctrine and virtue of the Holy Spirit he proclaimed the Kingdom of God with great confidence; as a true preacher . . . he never used flattering words and he despised all blandishments; what he preached to others in words, he had first experienced by deeds, so that he might speak the truth faithfully.”

One of my preaching heroes is Martin Niemöller. I know nothing about his style. But I do know that he organized resistance to the Nazi regime, and even spoke rudely to Hitler, who threw a tantrum in front of this simple preacher. Police spied on his worship services. But his courage in the pulpit was unrelenting. Imagine! Preaching a sermon series in Germany in 1939 on the theme, “God is my Führer”—which earned Niemöller torture and solitary confinement in Sachsenhausen and Dachau. After miraculously surviving the war, he returned to preaching, continuing to speak out against the Cold War, nuclear proliferation, and economic and racial injustice. As the journal *Die Welt* described him, “Niemöller has made friends and many enemies but he leaves nobody cold.”

In short, he was and continues to be interesting. He lived in the world, courageously and faithfully. He was clear and honest about God’s claim on his own life, and therefore on all our lives. He knew suffering, and made no attempt to pretend that God would shelter us from harm. He proclaimed Christ crucified, God immersed in the crises and agonies of life in this world, and Christ risen, the vanguard of God reclaiming God’s world, an adventure into which we are drawn. Nothing boring about it.

So be interesting. Parishioners are wondering if you will be, and more important, if the gospel is, if God is. And they are, so you will be. □



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