



TO CALVARY or not TO CALVARY

That Is the Question!

When I was first asked to write this article, I was ready to explore a vision that has been stirring in me since my seminary days, the idea that preaching is the place where prophesying and testifying meet. The preacher is called to “tell forth” (prophesy) and to resonate that truth within one’s own experience (testify). All of this was growing in me. In addition, the excitement that I was finally going to get the chance to put this down in writing was really a charge and a challenge.

Then (dramatic preaching pause), . . . it happened.

I was stopped one day going back to my office. A church member asked me point-blank a genuine and earnest question without malice or chagrin:

“Do you consider yourself a resurrection preacher?”

Initially, I was not quite sure what she meant but after probing a bit it turned

out that she wanted to know why there were not more frequent, explicit references to the Cross in my preaching. (This seamless blending of Good Friday’s Calvary and Resurrection Sunday’s empty grave is itself a part of the dilemma of the contemporary preacher and church. Albeit, the scene of this sacrifice and the setting for our atonement are at the core of our faith.)¹ The reflections and deep moorings about Calvary are most compelling and deeply moving to the believing listener. The sacred poetry

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about Calvary contains the most dramatic expressions of irony and contrast. That frighteningly fitful day has produced some of the most gripping pulpit images by imaginations burned with the godly passion of faithful pulpiteers:

I have heard some memorable poetic descriptions myself:

Christ died until death died.

The sun, embarrassed, hid its face behind the shroud of billowing dark clouds.

The earth, anxious and fearful, became so ill, she threw up her dead.

The moon dripped drops of blood! (Actually this line associated with Calvary is misappropriated by some preachers of my tradition from the Day of the Lord account from Joel 2.)

Christ was suspended between an earth that did not want Him and a heaven that could not touch Him.

With this rich database in mind, of course I replied, “Yes!” to my member’s inquiry, but her question stayed with me. I have been reflecting on that question ever since. I have left my wonderful theological pursuit for another time.

In writing for this article, I remembered that this was the only question I fudged on my oral ordination exam,

Q: What is the central symbol of Christian preaching?

A: The Cross.

At the core of this question was a deeper query about the perspective of contemporary preaching. The words from the Holy Writ haunt us, “We preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness” (1 Cor. 1:23 NKJV). (I really wish Paul had added the words “and resurrected!”)

My friend first thought this was a generational difference. It may be an indictment upon contemporary preachers. Some would love to think that older preachers live at the foot of the Cross; younger preachers prefer to live in the suburbs. Charles Spurgeon used to tell the preachers under his influence that it mattered not where they began their sermons but they should as soon as possible travel across country to

Calvary before the ending.² I do not think that is necessarily so.

THE INFERRED OR IMPLIED CALVARY

Let me say, for the record, I am a deeply Christocentric preacher. In fact, I believe that whenever I stand up to declare the gospel, I stand for and because of the Cross and the tomb. Despite our contemporary proclivities to be more subtle and inductive (seductive? provocative?) in preaching, in the church, people want to hear about Jesus.

A pastor friend of mine said that when he had gone to the church as a new pastor, one of the members made a chilling commentary about his predecessor. “The only time I heard him call on the name of Jesus during his tenure was when he tripped going down the back stairs to the fellowship hall!”

Is the Cross event as vital to our understanding of God’s claims upon the world and us as this “peculiar generation”? There are some things that I consider when preaching that the people who listen to me may not know.

Acknowledging Religious Pluralism:

Because we are in a culture now where being Christian cannot be assumed, the church must acknowledge that there are various ideas, images, and praxes of religion. In naiveté someone might think that in the United States particularly, the Christian story is the only salvation story circulating. That assumption can no longer be made. Religious pluralism has always been the case globally but for some reason American Christians believe there is a sudden shift to these systems. Perhaps we are taking note that one of the fastest growing religious interests in America is Buddhism. Does anyone remember Mars Hill? One should be careful here of a condescending triumphalism that I believe in the long run hurts the church’s witness. Nonetheless, because we are Christian, what happened in Christ does make us distinctive.

Overcoming the Postmodern Intolerance for Words:

We live in a sound bite world. The French philosopher Jacques Ellul characterized modern culture as a period of *The Humiliation of the Word*. The attention span of the contemporary listener is not what it may once have been. There is too much information to absorb in other places. Our tolerance of words alone, without visual or

sensory experiences, is minimal. Think of the impact that videos have on music sales. Whether or not the song is of good quality, if the video is good the music sells. Or think of the exorbitant costs we are willing to pay in our nation’s amusement parks and entertainment centers because of our pursuit of total sensory experiences. The preacher is at great disadvantage in this context. Mere words alone cannot compete with all of this.

Combating Biblical Illiteracy:

Whereas I do believe biblical illiteracy is a given, I am also a student of the Scriptures whose perspectives affirm the Hebrew Scriptures to stand by themselves as a testament to the faithfulness of the One True God. A good sermon from the Hebrew Scriptures need not necessarily “go by Calvary” in order to be truthful or Christian. As example, one of my favorite texts is the riveting and passionate story of Jacob wrestling with God at the ford of Jabbok. Without a mention of Jesus, textually, we experience the powerful epiphany of God’s willingness to struggle with us in order to bring on our transformation. God willingly “becomes dirty with us” long enough for us to see ourselves differently. Can this text be preached without explicit reference to Christ? Absolutely. Is there something of God’s incarnation in Christ that can be connected to this story? Yes.

Moving Beyond Empty Creedalism:

Quite candidly, some of the language we use about Christ and the work of our salvation is absolutely foreign in this current context. It is not enough to simply recapitulate our beliefs about Christ and the Cross. The language of our creeds and doctrines needs to be graspable by the listeners who do not fully know or embrace our constructed belief statements. Listen to what we affirm in the Apostles’ Creed about Jesus:

*I believe in Jesus Christ,
his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and will come again to judge the living
and the dead.*

This has always troubled me. These sentences about Jesus skip over his life, the things he did, the people he touched, the words he spoke. What of the life and sayings of Jesus? Are they not important? Our creedal forms of religion skip over all scenes, scenarios, and sayings of Christ that allow us to see that Christ truly identifies with us in our suffering. It is not enough to declare the things that we hold to be true in faith. The contemporary listener is helped to understand the efficacy of the Cross—the propitiation for our sins—when he or she is given insight as to how Jesus ended up on the Cross in the first place.

WHAT IS AT STAKE AT CALVARY?

Disrupting Religion as Usual: Accepting these givens in our current culture and context for preaching, can the contemporary preacher still sidestep the power and place of the Cross in preaching? The listener does have a vested interest in the accomplishments and the consequences of this event. But is implied Calvary enough in a community of believers whose very existence is

inextricably bound to the events of the Cross and the empty tomb? “If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain” (1 Cor. 15:17 KJV).

But what is at stake for listeners? They still long to hear the distinctive essence of the Christ event. They melodiously sing “Tell me the stories of Jesus I love to hear.”

This kind of warm and fuzzy piety troubles my spirit. What about the biblical pictures and images of Christ that make us squirm and feel squeamish? There are things about Christ and the Christian walk we do not want to hear. The Cross is an offense.

Perhaps some of our unwillingness to talk of the Cross is that it is brutal and brutish. A cross is a cruel and crude form of human torture. We are not as likely in this day and age to speak of blood and pain when it comes to Christian service and sacrifice. Those words offend our sensibilities. They also stand in judgment against the present apostasy of a religion that feels good, makes us look better, and encourages us to accumulate more personal stuff.

Answering the Glorification of Needless Death: In my youth, one of the youth choirs sang a song by Andraé Crouch, “I Am Glad for the Cross Where Jesus Died.”

I remember so vividly coming home and asking my father. “Why would people be glad for death?” That’s a good question in our violent world. How do we speak of Christ’s death in a time when death is the most prevalent news we hear? Death is not new news. Death is nearly all the news. An earthquake strikes without warning in a previously unknown part of the world. We watch as multitudes lose life under crumbled buildings. A gun-wielding teenager, depressed and alone, randomly shoots his classmates who have been teasing or ignoring him. Although curtailed in some measure in developed countries, AIDS continues to spin out of control in the continent of Africa. Death is all our news. What makes Christ’s death so special? These other places and spaces of death in our contemporary world happen so frequently that we are immune to death, for in some cases, we have been bombarded by death so much that we just close it off. Our

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capacity to feel sorrow has been greatly diminished. We just ignore it.

There is nothing redemptive about death, only in this one death in which there was something redemptive.

There is something about Calvary that cannot be replicated or reproduced. Gardner Taylor says that even the Gospel writers themselves tread upon this event with certain carefulness: “The Gospel writers would not, could not elaborate and rhapsodize upon the event. You read all four of the accounts of the crucifixion as they appear . . . and in none of them will you see any flabby phrases, any ponderous passages, and purple and florid oratory.”³

Using the Cross to Shape Our Sermons: I have read many articles in my work as a preacher that have raised the right questions for me and stimulated me to deeper thinking about what I believe. But as a preacher who must face people weekly (weakly?) I have needed more practical wisdom about how to articulate these discoveries to a congregation that may not be reading or listening to the same things I do.

Given the contextual complexities mentioned above, never before has the teaching dimension been as critical as today. There are some stories and experiences passed down from generation to generation within believing communities but very rarely does one see the inter-generational “unfeigned faith” Paul describes in Timothy, his mother, Eunice, and grandmother, Lois. This faith has been short-circuited by wars, substance addictions, or just plain disinterest. The church’s own failure to remain relevant in our world has not thwarted the authentically human quest for meaning and purpose. The preacher is called to give the listeners a grasp of the global information and circumstance they do not know or may resist knowing.

What prevents the church from being an also-ran organization and gathering place in the lives of its members? If the church is a place of natural selection, meaning that people would gravitate toward one another with or without the stories and person of Christ, it loses its power. The Cross draws us to gather with people whom we would not otherwise be inclined to meet. This event in Christ is the one place where “righteousness and peace

have kissed each other” (Ps. 85:10 KJV) or better yet, to use Thomas Aquinas’s rendition, “‘Mercy and truth have met each other’ when truth stands for justice.”⁴

Perhaps one way to overcome the indictment of the original question posed to me is to use the shape of the Cross to shape one’s sermon. Commitment to the Cross is not merely spoken; it is incarnate in the sermon structure and design.

Look at the Cross carefully. It extends three ways: higher, deeper, and wider.

Higher

There is a certain and distinctive dimension of preaching that calls for the listener to engage the text and one’s own context with a higher, more reverent intentional-

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ity. This call to go higher stands above mere Cross piety. The sermon should cause its listeners to stretch above their normal reach; to be challenged to see things higher than the regular and routine; to risk enough to lift our heads and get a God-perspective on our sufferings and conditions. That is a movement and goal of any Christian preaching.

Deeper

Very few preachers miss this reverent aspect of Cross-centered preaching but we too often overlook that fact that what holds the Cross up at a perpendicular to the earth is that it is firmly planted and grounded in the earth. The Cross could not be raised or sustain a long period of power had it not been anchored in the earth. Our Cross-centered preaching cannot be suspended in midair, afraid to touch terra firma. Enough of our Cross-centered preaching must be in the earth, in the dirt of our earthly existence, to keep God’s reverent and holy actions from being in divine disconnect with us.

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Wider

Kosuko Koyama was professor of ecumenical Christianity when I attended Union Theological Seminary in New York. I remember a powerful image he used of Christ on the Cross in a sermon in James Chapel. He described the crucified Christ with nails in his wrists; our Lord’s hands were “painfully opened.” A preacher must ask this question: “How do I get the listener to make this painfully opened stretch outward?”

The preacher attempts to give the listener a wider view and understanding of scripture, a wider perspective of community, and a wider sense of God’s call to relationships of mutuality.

One can apply this Cross-centered structure to any text within the Bible without violating textual integrity. Raising three simple questions can center any sermon in the shape of Calvary.

- How can we go higher by this text?
- How can we go deeper?
- How can we go wider?

There is something within me that concedes that the language I have at my discretion to express the height, depth, and span of the Cross for the church and in my own life fails me. There is a mystery here I can only get to at its edges. Maybe this is why I do not spend more time in sermons explicitly referencing Calvary. As a believer, Calvary is in me. As a Christian preacher, I am in Calvary, always. □

1 S. Mark Heim has a provocative two-part essay on the cross of Jesus and its meaning in *The Christian Century* (March 7 and March 14, 2001).

2 As paraphrased by Gardner Taylor in “Still Another Look at the Calvary,” a sermon preached March 22, 1970.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, Question 21, Article 2.



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