



# The Ultimate Vocation

Richard Lischer

If we know anything about preaching, we know that whatever we do and however we do it is the result of a call. Remember, Martin Luther King said the calling to speak is a vocation of agony. He used these synonyms as if to remind us that it's not by accident or personal choice that we take up the Word of God every Sunday. It is our vocation.

Sometimes vocation is confused with a profession. What we question in regard to the ministry is not its status as a profession but its vulnerability to professionalism, which is marked by a fascination with specialization, process, credentials, and measurable outcomes, the net effect of which is to undermine the minister's priestly and prophetic identity.

Theologically, what distinguishes a vocation from the rigors of a profession is this: you have to die to enter a vocation. A profession summons the best from you. A vocation calls you away from what you thought was best in you, purifies it, and promises to make you something or someone you are not yet.

In the Bible, God's call touches the most inviolable places in the human being. When God calls, you get a new name. You switch from Saul to Paul, from Simon to Peter. Once upon a time your name was "Emily," but now they call you "Preacher." You do not acquire a new gender or race, but these categories lose the definitive significance they claim in the wider culture. You give up your old family and gain a new one among whom you can speak freely. You are given a new ability, one that transfigures the old *dis*-abilities that once defined you as a person. It is significant that in the Old Testament God appoints as his chief spokesperson a stammerer. A vocation puts an end to you in order to disclose your true end.

No one understands this better than those who preach either

from the margins of power or in defiance of it. Of course, not everyone comes to the preaching office by way of the Damascus Road. Some experience the gentler realization that their lives do not belong to them as fully as they once imagined. They cut the support lines that once connected them to cultural rewards. They let go of something. Their call, too, is marked by the grief of loss *and* the inexpressible joy of knowing that God wants them to speak.

For those who are barred from religious office because of their gender, sexual orientation, or disability, the rhetoric of death has always posed a danger. Women, in particular, have repeatedly been told they must die to self, ambition, and will, only to be passed over for certain positions in the church—for their lack of ambition, drive, and will. For this reason women ministers are more likely than men to justify their presence in the pulpit on the basis of their call from God. For the rhetoric of the call does not crush the self or annihilate individual gifts but is prelude to a tremendous release of power. Women pastors continue to report that they experience the highest degree of freedom for ministry in the pulpit.<sup>1</sup>

For preachers, as for all Christians, the journey from death to prophecy begins in baptism. Those who are baptized into Christ are baptized into his death, buried with him, so that just as he was raised from the dead, we too might walk—and talk—in newness of life. Our call follows the curve of his call.

Baptism signifies the death of one kind of language and the birth of another. As with all new vocations, this one brings with it the crisis of a new and unfamiliar vocabulary.

Paul portrays the ministry of the word as a continuous action of being put to death and being renewed every day, as if pastoral

care consists of thousands of mini-funerals and mini-Easters, moments of truth when this cancer or that divorce, this breakthrough or that triumph, puts the crucified and risen Lord right there with us on the razor's edge of ministry.

This is the mystic chain that connects suffering, action, hope, and words. All the disappointments and suffering represent the death of Jesus. The victories of hope and reconciliation, of unlocked jaws and really great sermons, of second winds and new beginnings, embody his resurrection from the dead.

In the act of preaching, something dies and something rises. What dies (or should die) is the preoccupation with the self that plagues so many performers. This death is ironic, since some sense of "self" is stimulated by God's call in the first place and is necessary for public speaking. The prophets are uniformly annihilated by a conversation with God, only to reappear as powerful individual performers of the word on God's behalf. They do not lack a sense of self.

In Book 4 of *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine counseled preachers to subject their personal style to the rhetorical style of the text and the demands of the occasion. For example, you yourself may not be a particularly kerygmatic person, but the combination of Easter and a text from 1 Corinthians 15 will make you one. Even if you are not feeling doxological this Sunday, Paul's hymn to the majesty of God in Romans 11 will evoke a doxological sermon. When you lift your arms in praise, it is not really you who are doing that but the text, the Spirit, and the whole people of God moving in and through you. You and I might never choose to speak in so unprotected a manner ("that's not *me*"), but in the church that is the very speech that is given you and indeed reconstitutes "you" among the people of God.

### **"The Church and I Were One"**

What rises in the act of preaching? What rises is the remarkable synergy of the spoken word and the life of the baptized community, which in the parlance of Isaiah is the gift of a "new thing." It may not be possible for the speaker to become "constituted" with the audience, as one of my teachers used to counsel, but the spoken word is always aspiring to such communion. I have not found a livelier expression of this confluence of speaker and hearer than in the memoir of the novelist James Baldwin. In the essay "Down at the Cross," he is remembering his days as a boy preacher in a pentecostal church: "Nothing that has happened to me since equals the power and the glory that I sometimes felt when, in the middle of a sermon, I knew that I

was somehow by some miracle, really carrying, as they said, 'the Word'—when the church and I were one."<sup>2</sup>

When men and women take a deep baptismal plunge into ministry, they invariably surface as changed preachers. One pastor discovered the poor in his parish—not in some other neighborhood but in his own parish—and his preaching took on a new urgency. Another devoted herself to prayer for the sick as never before and began to speak with power she had never experienced. One discovered the ministry of his congregation as his wife lay dying, and in the midst of unspeakable sorrow he developed a new power to speak. Many a church's mission has loosed the tongue of its preacher.

The words of the sermon belong to the common life of God's people. The sermon emerges from the language of a believing community. It seems so obvious. But, as Robert Bellah has observed, our culture of radical individualism knows only two languages, facts and feelings, both of which claim to stand alone independent of any community.<sup>3</sup> Some preachers try to prove the "facticity" of the biblical

record, dazzling their hearers with impressive data, while others build on issues raised by universal human experience (though rarely, it must be noted, does the human heart ask questions, the answers to which are *Trinity, cross, obedience, forgiveness*). Neither the conservatives nor the liberals capture the whole truth of the word.

Bonhoeffer and Barth broke the impasse long ago by boldly asserting the presence of the risen Christ within the linguistic community of the church. Bonhoeffer said the sermon is only Jesus pacing back and forth among his people. Barth said that the preacher stands between two Advents, the first and second comings of the Lord, by which he meant that because the risen Christ is alive and moving toward us from his own future, the preacher is not constrained to make him relevant as if Jesus were only a figure from the distant past. We do not have to prove that he is real because he is already here.

The point of preaching is not to go back but to meet the Lord out ahead. Training in preaching begins with training for ministry. Preachers have ransacked nature, history, and their own emotions for illustrations of the divine. They have scratched into every conceivable experience in search of divinity or its analogues. They have explored every possible site except the very places Jesus promises to be—among those who suffer and seek restoration.

Preachers have looked for him virtually everywhere save among the ordinary practices of the people of God, who yearn

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more deeply than they are willing to admit for sermons that credibly portray *their* lives of faith—not Mother Teresa’s, Gandhi’s, or Gandolf’s, but theirs. “If one wishes to promote the life of language,” writes the poet Wendell Berry in *Standing by Words*, “one must promote the life of the community” in which the language flourishes.<sup>4</sup>

One Sunday in our congregation we baptized a baby the day after its mother’s funeral. You don’t have to be a professor of homiletics to wonder what the preacher will say in such a moment. Normally,

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Preachers are authorized to say things that if they did not utter them no one would ever hear, except the stones cried out. Laments, blessings, oracles, doxologies. Where do you go to hear such talk? To what channel or court or classroom?

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our pastor never left the pulpit, but on that Sunday he did. I can still see him, the baby cradled in the crook of his arm, as he preached while pacing up and down the center aisle as if to reinforce Bonhoeffer’s definition of the sermon as Christ moving among his people. He tearfully claimed the praise of God for the child, and sternly reminded us of our responsibility toward her. The community responded to this intense, ambulatory sermon by vowing to care for the child. Technically, it was not a perfect sermon, only the right sermon for us. That morning the church and the word were one.

There is a goodness about the preaching office that transcends individual performance. Preaching is the ultimate vocation because at this the end of the age when so many sit stupefied and traumatized, the word gives power both to those who hear and to those who speak. It will save your life.

## The True End of Words

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Only in the community of faith. These forms of language require God as their final audience. They presuppose the creature’s ability to respond to its creator and testify to the ultimate purpose of speech, which is to reflect the holiness of God and to effect reconciliation among God’s creatures.

Sometimes preachers cannot help but envy other users of words in our culture. News anchors, analysts, comics, pundits, and savants: They are so smooth. They have but to open their mouths and out flows the spirit of the age. They are so professional that they are able to deliver gut-wrenching information without a hint of emotional investment, and all with an air of effortless familiarity. Next to them, the preacher often appears to be fighting off a swarm of bees. Why? Because preachers are speaking from the embedded position. Because their language emerges from pastoral participation in the life and death struggles of the baptized. Speaking of the apostle Paul, who by any account we have of him was not a smooth man, Joseph Sittler said: “Where grammar cracks, grace erupts.” He adds a stern warning to preachers: “What God has riven asunder, let no preacher too suavely join together.”<sup>5</sup>

Our baptismal call remains the same, but the vocation to preach changes over time. In form and venue, preaching has a constantly mutating quality that reflects

the restless freedom of God and makes of it the ultimate postmodern activity. Disdaining grand truths, systems, and metaphysics, and proofs, it revels in the fragmentariness of its own art. It trusts the slimmest of evidence. Among the poets its patron saint must be Emily Dickinson, who wrote, “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant.../The Truth must dazzle gradually/Or every man be blind.”

What else can the God who has been pushed onto a cross yield but glimpses of redemption offered by imperfect men and women to those with eyes to see? What else can these thin slices of literature called “texts” reveal but slants of light and vivid “for instances” of something so brilliant that if we saw it whole it would kill us?

The work of preaching is carried out by men and women who are both tormented and comforted by the knowledge that next week and the week after, they will begin where they always begin, at the end of words, armed only with the conviction, “We can preach.”

That there is such a vocation in this world means there is hope for all of us. □

1. Carol M. Norén, *The Woman in the Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 16. On women’s freedom in the pulpit, see pp. 46–48.

2. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial, 1963), 47.

3. Robert N. Bellah, “Christian Faithfulness in a Pluralist World,” in *Postmodern Theology*, ed. Frederic B. Burnham (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 75.

4. Wendell Berry, *Standing By Words* (San Francisco: North Point, 1983), 34.

5. Joseph Sittler, *The Ecology of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), 56–57.



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