

Hard words

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [May 2, 2001](#) issue

One reason I teach undergraduate religion instead of preaching is that I am not sure preaching can be taught. During the spring semester I tested this premise by offering an elective at McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta, titled “Preaching Difficult Texts.” The students and I spent the first day deciding what kinds of texts those were.

At the top of the list were miracle stories. We were not as bothered by Moses’ parting of the Red Sea or Jesus’ feeding of the 5,000 as we were by the simplest healing miracles. One woman who had served as chaplain in a children’s hospital remembered when the raising of Jairus’s daughter showed up on the lectionary for her assigned Sunday in chapel. She preached on the psalm instead.

The next most difficult texts were those about God-sanctioned violence. Joshua and Judges were not hot picks for a summer preaching series, nor was anyone eager to proclaim the good news of Elijah’s slaughter of the prophets of Baal. At first it seemed as if all such troublesome texts were in the Hebrew Bible. Then someone mentioned the frightful deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. Someone else confessed that he had grown up with teachings about Jesus’ death that sounded like God-sanctioned violence to him. What loving father wills the crucifixion of his child?

Exclusive texts turned up third on the list. Paul received a lot of attention here, not only for his famous injunctions on women and homosexuals but also for his occasional outbursts against “the Jews” (1 Thess. 2:14-16). John 14:6 was a stumbling block for some of us. Jesus may not have known any Buddhists or Hindus. He certainly did not know any Muslims, but we do, and it is difficult to believe that God’s door is shut to them.

We identified several other kinds of difficult texts, including epistles, genealogies, Christmas and Easter texts. But the fourth category we settled on were cryptic texts such as Daniel, Revelation and some sayings of Jesus. No one could remember ever having heard a sermon on the passage surrounding Luke 22:36 (“And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one”), and many had never heard the last

book of the Bible read in church.

By the time we finished, most of us had to admit that our faith has been shaped by a canon considerably smaller than the official one. Like Marcion, we live by edited versions of our favorite Gospels and the epistles of Paul that we like. While we publicly affirm the God of the older testament to be the God of the newer one, we secretly believe that Jesus is a great improvement on Yahweh. If we looked at our closed Bibles from the side, it would be easy for us to see how few pages we have smudged through frequent use.

We also recognized that the problem is not just ours, but one that affects the whole church. Those of us who preach from the lectionary have never been confronted with Moses' killing of the 3,000 in the wilderness (Ex. 32:25 ff.) or Jephthah's murder of his daughter (Judg. 11:29 ff.). Those who are free to choose their own texts do not think immediately of Paul's instructions on the veiling of women (1 Cor. 11:6) or the seven bowls of the wrath of God (Rev. 15:1 ff.).

By omitting such difficult texts from public discourse in the church, we are leaving the hardest parts of the Bible for people to make sense of on their own—or relinquishing our duties to radio and television preachers who are not as squeamish as we. Either way, we are supporting a sanitized version of holy scripture that allows people to speak breezily of the Bible as “life's instruction book.”

In an effort to engage more of the Bible, each student agreed to preach two of these texts in class. I chose the hardest ones I could find, feeling like the assistant who bound Houdini with chains before lowering him head first into a water tank. To our mutual amazement, the students came up with some of the freshest sermons any of us had heard in ages. Here is what we discovered.

Because we are not used to hearing these difficult texts, our ears have no calluses on them. Familiar stories such as the Flood or Sodom and Gomorrah have lost their shock value for us, but not so with the stories of God's judgment on Miriam (Num. 12:10 ff.) or Jericho (Josh. 6:15 ff.). When we engage these lesser-known stories, we are not protected from them by layers of interpretation. The commentaries do not say much about them, and it is often up to us to wrestle them on our own.

Furthermore, there are no other sermons for us to use in jump-starting our own. Frederick Buechner is no help at all with the whore of Babylon, and as far as I know *The Library of Distinguished Sermons* does not contain a single one on the rape of

Tamar. Preaching these texts, we have no choice but to sound fresh. The only voices we have heard addressing them out loud are our own.

Finally, these texts force us to question our domesticated images of God. Like any people who have settled into a long, committed relationship, we have developed ideas of God that allow us to stay engaged. But if there is any sense in which we believe that the Bible tells us the truth about God, then our God is not only just and compassionate but also sometimes volatile and merciless. Whether this is God's fault or the fault of those who have written God down, it is not a bad thing for us to wonder whether the God we know is all the God there is.