

Protecting people with words

Excellent Christian preaching names and explores the shadows in order to declare that the light shines in the darkness.

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Our six-year-old son Jonah likes to have his toenails painted. Who wouldn't, really? It's downright delightful to express yourself with color and sparkle and to receive a few precious minutes of creative, quiet and undivided attention from Mom or Dad. Why should his younger sister have all the fun?

But here's the thing: Jonah's friends at school have made it abundantly clear that when it comes to toenails, seafoam green and Superman red aren't acceptable for a six-year-old boy. So when he wants to sport those colors, Jonah has taken to doing so under cover of socks and shoes, using them as an armor-like protection against cultural forces much larger and more formidable than his four-foot frame can handle.

They start in so soon, these forces that swirl around us, threatening to sweep away not only particular delights but also, if we let them, the very heart of our humanity. A boy in our daughter's preschool class, whose father was killed earlier this year in

gang-related violence, sometimes wears a crimson hoodie decorated with photos of his father on the front. Across the back is a striking, defiant message: “The father was despised, and so shall be the son.” His family covers him in that sweatshirt like a preemptive protest, like armor in a world ravaged by violence, poverty and racism.

These dehumanizing forces are in the air we breathe: want, war, sexism, pornography, homophobia, domestic violence, incest and indifference. We can try to look away or think happier thoughts, of course, and we often do. But the forces are still there. We breathe in, we breathe out. Socks on. Hood up.

To speak in this way of cultural and spiritual forces is not (or should not be) to evoke some sort of invisible, sinister stuff at loose in the world. Rather, it’s to take seriously the fact that phenomena like these can have a diffuse, insidious kind of power.

It’s not that we aren’t individually responsible for these realities—we are, but our responsibilities are also complexly shared among neighbors, between communities and across generations. And it’s not that we can’t diminish or even defeat these forces—we can, but they are often perplexingly tenacious and tricky, shifting and slipping beyond our grasp. As we struggle with them over time, they feel less like problems to be solved and more like foes to be fought.

On any given Sunday, whether it’s a church of 30 or 3,000, people come—and those dehumanizing forces come along with them, invading and besieging the sanctuary. As congregations gather and worship, the people hear more than the scripture reading, sermon, prayers and hymns. They hear the rumbling storms outside rattling the stained glass. They hear the rain beating down on this ancient ark we call the church—and they hear the discouraging whispers in their own hearts and minds, those disarmingly credible lies that haunt us all.

When it comes to Christian preaching, then, sermons should protect people with words. In intimate, visceral, vivid ways, preachers should name and contradict the disarming lies and then replace them with equally intimate, wondrous and wearable forms of truth. Sermons should stir us to stand firm against death-dealing forces wherever we find them.

You don’t have to believe in cartoonish demons to recognize the power of casting all of this in terms of figurative combat, of armor and protection and foes to be fought. Yes, it’s a poetic strategy, but this kind of poetry is not just a figure of speech.

Metaphors are not trifles. When they fit, they capture things that other forms of language miss; they go places that prose cannot go. Sometimes poetry is the best defense we have.

Take the letter to the Ephesians. The author summons us to “put on the whole armor of God” to stand against “the spiritual forces of evil.” Our struggle is not against an enemy of flesh and blood, but against “this present darkness” that swirls around and within us (6:11–12).

Excellent Christian preaching names and explores these shadows in order to declare that the light shines in the darkness, and that the darkness has not and will not overcome it.

Shadows and light, arrows and armor—these are the terms in which the author of Ephesians frames the task of Christian preaching, the act of “[making] known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains” (6:19). Karl Barth urged preachers to immerse themselves not only in scripture but also in the newspaper, and Ephesians helps us understand how we should read them both—and, for that matter, how we should read the mundane and marvelous events of our everyday lives.

Read closely, for starters. Pay special attention to shadows and light, arrows and armor. Ask yourself which threats most clearly function as a “present darkness” for members of your community this week, in this particular time and place. Which most clearly resemble “the flaming arrows” against which only “the shield of faith” will suffice (6:16)? This is pastoral work in the deepest sense, the work of a shepherd well aware of the area’s wolves and badlands, who protects and guides the flock to green pastures and still waters.

In a world where young children are shamed into narrow gender roles, where violence shatters families and where tourism for the purpose of engaging in prostitution is on the rise, we need Christian preaching that names and stands firm against such forces and equips listeners with the poetic armor required to do the same.

Understood from this angle, Christian preaching is a kind of pragmatic poetics, a strategic attempt to draw upon the most beautiful and compelling language we have in order to confront the most difficult and deadly challenges we face. This kind of preaching is not primarily an exercise in taking a position or “prophetic stand” on

some pressing issue, nor is it primarily a matter of interpreting a scriptural passage in its historical context, or even of declaring the good news of God's saving grace with doctrinal precision.

No, a sermon is not an op-ed piece read aloud, an exegetical lecture or a doctrinally sound gospel declaration. Of course, excellent sermons will include opinions, exegesis and good news. But if the central task of preaching is to protect people with words by "[making] known with boldness the mystery of the gospel"—*that* is a special, distinctive type of rhetorical art.

"The mystery of the gospel" is not something that can be explained, captured or flattened out into a set of concepts. On the contrary, it can only be evoked and encountered again and again. Accordingly, making known the mystery of the gospel involves an embodied, interpersonal kind of knowledge, not an abstract, conceptual sort. In short, it involves personally and communally experiencing the mystery of God-with-us. The preacher's task is to help foster this experience.

Fred Craddock once drew an illuminating distinction between "informational language" and "generative language." The former, he said, conveys information about a subject; the latter generates an experience of it.

"In your next Mother's Day sermon," Craddock explained, "you can say 'motherhood' a hundred times, and it won't do you or anyone else much good. 'Motherhood, motherhood, motherhood, motherhood . . .' On the other hand, if you can get us to smell burped milk on a blouse"—he paused, a twinkle in his eye, as sighs of recognition rippled through the room—"well, then you're preaching."

Generative language is experiential language; it's "you are there" language that collapses time and space. We smell burped milk. We see Superman red. We have experiences that, technically speaking, we aren't actually having. The preacher paints a picture—and wondrously, we're somehow in it, a part of it, experiencing it here and now.

What kind of words do that? What kind of language generates a rhetorical form of experience? What kind of speech gets us to smell and see and feel through verbal, vivid vignettes?

We often call such language poetic, and sure enough, many of those savants we call poets deploy words this way exceedingly well—Ted Kooser, Mary Oliver and Billy

Collins, to name a few. But the art is by no means limited to poetry. Generative language has always been a hallmark of excellent storytelling, literature, teaching, journalism and other rhetorical acts. For preachers, perhaps the best resource in this regard is Christian scripture, a treasury overflowing with some of the most vibrant, evocative and generative language humankind has ever known.

Christian preaching today would benefit from more generative language—particularly at the heart of the sermon instead of in the relatively peripheral “sermon illustrations.” At its best, generative language makes worlds with words, fostering emotional, practically sensual engagement. This kind of activity ought to constitute the sermon’s main event, not sideshows merely illustrating what is still basically an informational, conceptual exposition.

There is no question, of course, that sermons should be scripturally engaged, conceptually rigorous and doctrinally edifying. But the point of scripture, theological concepts and doctrine is to help human communities properly experience and understand our lives as lived with and in God.

Sermons should be shining examples of scripture and doctrine playing this clarifying, interpretive, supporting role. Accordingly, as preachers craft sermons, we should think less in terms of little life portraits that illustrate doctrinal claims and more in terms of little doctrinal excurses that illuminate bold, vivid life portraits. To this end, generative language is a preacher’s best friend.

This all becomes clear when we remember that a Christian sermon is primarily for protecting people with words. Throughout the week, human beings inhabit a life-and-death world full of shadows and arrows, cancer and eating disorders, injustice and despair—and we therefore need armor, wearable forms of truth designed to help us live with courage, dignity and grace.

Merely being able to recite, say, the idea that “we are all children of God” will not do; we need a deep-seated, visceral sense of this childhood. What really counts is whether we can *feel* this childhood, sense it, hear it, see it, smell it and taste it—and thereby experience it often enough to truly believe it when the shadows fall.

One sermon a week can hardly provide this kind of protection. But if, once a week, a preacher can model how life is interpretable in light of the mystery of the gospel, he or she may empower listeners to do the same throughout the week.

If this is the goal, then generative rhetoric is an indispensable tool in the homiletical toolbox. “You are there” experiential language will make a sermon’s shadows and light more clear, compelling and viscerally present to the congregation—making the sermon a guided experience of the sort of thing listeners can do long after the worship service has ended.

With this in mind, let us preachers don the whole armor of the rhetorical traditions the church has inherited: key lines and passages of scripture, but also the most striking, memorable, generative language we can find.

Moreover, let us put on the breastplate of beauty. Let this beauty be seen not only in a sermon’s sentences, but also in its overall form and structure. Let the movements of the sermon unfold like the movements of a symphony, complete with recurring themes, distinct emotional tones, building suspense and a strong, stirring conclusion. If the preacher opens with a lucid, accessible story, let her return to it at the sermon’s close, reframing the story from a new angle. An *inclusio* can be one of the most satisfying rhetorical strategies, providing listeners with an intuitive sense of wholeness and completion.

Let us fasten the belt of poetry around our waists—and let poems be a discipline of homiletic preparation. Just as the Christian sacraments, properly understood, open our eyes to see common bread and water in a new light, so great poetry can shape our imaginative vision and vocabulary, disclosing anew God’s story in our stories.

And when we tell those stories in our preaching, let us do so with “you are there” immediacy. Too often preachers deliver stories at an arm’s length, or without an underlying sense of urgency and moment. Beginning with some variation of “As I was preparing this sermon,” for example, transports listeners to the pastor’s study—at best a mildly interesting place and at worst an unfortunate distraction. Instead, take listeners to other places, and then rhetorically show them around, from the inside out.

Lean into archetypal stories and vignettes, classic experiences that everyone can relate to: the risk of learning to ride a bike, the ache of a broken heart or the feeling of being lost in an unfamiliar landscape. Along the way, single out details that play to the senses: the smell of a hospital room, the sound of a school bell, the weight of a hammer or the threat of an incoming storm.

Let manuscript preachers experiment with preaching without notes, if not for the entire sermon, then for portions of it. These experiments can help us discover our own storytelling style, build a different form of intimacy with our congregations and develop what the late Peter Gomes called language fit for the ear, not for the eye.

Finally, with or without notes, let the preachers' sermons climax and close with radiant good news. Every sermon should travel through the shadows and arrows of Good Friday—but always for the sake of the empty tomb. Sermons should culminate with encouragement, hope and joy. As the rabbis long ago pointed out, even the divine words of exile from Eden, “and to dust you shall return,” end with an echo that doubles as a promise: “. . . you shall return” (Gen. 3:19).

Even in the midst of exile, joy shakes the dust off its feet and returns. On a trip to Central America some years ago, we visited the Museum of the Martyrs in San Salvador, then stopped at the small chapel in which Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated while celebrating the Eucharist. Our mood was somber. Outside the chapel entrance, however, we noticed that bright grains of rice dotted the front walkway, and that inside, pink rose petals had been scattered up and down the central aisle.

The chancel and altar—the spot where the archbishop had fallen—were decked out in magnificent bouquets of white lilies, orchids and more roses left over from a wedding earlier that day. But to us they seemed to be signs of resurrection, bold testimony that the mystery of the gospel shall not be denied, no matter what arrows may come.

Monsignor Romero was an ambassador for this beautiful, irrepressible good news. In his preaching as in his life, he stood against the dehumanizing forces of his time and place, and he equipped and encouraged his listeners to do likewise. As best he could, again and again, he endeavored to protect people with words.

Once the Holy Spirit had gotten hold of him, he stood firm and could do no other. He reassured victims with words of justice and new life. He challenged perpetrators with calls to repentance and the promise of forgiveness. He was an ambassador of freedom, an envoy and herald of God's dawning reign. But by the same token, he was also an ambassador in chains, standing in solidarity with a world in bondage. Following Jesus, he preached liberty to the captives—from inside prison walls.

Precious few of us are saints. But each and every one of us, in our own small way, is charged to swaddle our listeners with words that protect and encourage. To the extent that we preach at all, each one of us is an emissary of God's kingdom, an ambassador in chains. This keeps us clear about what preaching is for—and helps us choose the rhetorical tools best suited to the task.

In the end, of course, the task itself is not our work to do. We may participate in it if and when the Spirit moves. But the work of "making known with boldness the mystery of the gospel" belongs, as it always has, to God.

Should we fall silent, the great sermon of creation itself will continue apace. Color and sparkle will dance and delight as ever, seafoam green and Superman red. Even the stones will cry out. Even the blood-drenched altars will one day give way to new vows, and petals, and impossible joy.

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