Mariann Budde stoked fires of mercy

It’s been said that a sermon should be judged by its impact beyond the moment when it’s preached. In the last month, the bishop’s sermon at the National Cathedral has been making a difference.

by Katherine Willis Pershey
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Century illustration

I've been to the National Cathedral twice, both times for preaching workshops cosponsored by the now defunct College of Preachers and the nascent Young Clergy Women International. I was queasy with pregnancy hormones and dizzy with prenatal anxiety during the first gathering, but nothing could have stopped me from attending. I had been lonely and isolated in the two years since my ordination, so being in a room full of pastors who were also navigating the complicated intersections of congregational ministry, age, and gender was exhilarating.

As I was collecting lifelong friends on the first night, we discovered a photograph of an early preaching conference held on the cathedral campus. The black and white film and the preachers' garments dated the photo to around the 1950s. All the pastors were men. And yet we were there for the same purpose: to study the word of God and the art of preaching in order to be good and faithful servants of Christ and his church.

The workshop leader instructed us to select one text to focus on for the week. I had time and the National Cathedral library at my fingertips, so I intentionally chose one of the more challenging upcoming lectionary texts, a passage from Jeremiah. It includes these words: "Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the Lord. Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (23:28–29).

I still have the manuscript of the sermon I wrote. It was fine, I guess. I was an ambitious yet inexperienced preacher. Most of the good stuff was quotes from other people, including one from theologian Louis Stuhlman, who reflects on the crisis of false prophecy:

> When prophets avoid the divine counsel and compromise their vocation, nations have their way and no one dares to bring them to their senses. When prophets cease being God's voice, sweatshops make sense, gaps between the rich and poor are merely the result of market forces, murdered civilians are collateral damage, and landmines tearing off arms and legs are just security burdens.

I did have one good line that I didn't attribute to anyone else, so I *think* I can claim it as my own: "Nebuchadnezzar wears a different uniform, but the politics of

dominance still bring about destruction.”

On the last night I tossed and turned, dreaming about the ancient and piercing words of Jeremiah. Just before dawn I had a nightmare: I dreamed that I opened my mouth and all my teeth fell out. I’m not much for dream interpretation, but the dream was so vivid—and Jeremiah’s words about dreams so pointed—that I looked it up in a dream dictionary the next day. Apparently people dream of their teeth falling out when they are afraid that their voice cannot or will not be heard. I also managed to find a biblical dream interpretation website indicating that the dreamer is putting her faith in what human beings value rather than in the word of God. (Even in 2007, you could find pretty much anything on the internet.)

I woke up with a mouth full of teeth, flew home, and preached the sermon that felt like the word of God hot on my tongue.

I experienced a kaleidoscope of emotion last month when Episcopal bishop Mariann Edgar Budde stood in the National Cathedral pulpit and preached about dignity, honesty, and humility as the foundation of unity before calmly and directly pleading with the president of the United States to have mercy on the people in our country who are scared. Her gentle demeanor and plain language belied the awesome power of the words she spoke. The pulpit may have been dripping with roses, but the biblical mandate to be merciful to the vulnerable was unadorned. Maybe it is madness to make such a bold claim, but Budde looked and sounded suspiciously like a prophet to me. She opened her mouth and the word of God fell out.

My female clergy colleagues immediately went into fangirl mode. Someone organized a gift basket and donation to her bishop’s fund to be sent to her office at the cathedral; someone else printed T-shirts, as if the bishop were headlining the next Lollapalooza. We saw ourselves and our ministries reflected in her. We were wildly grateful that she had spoken up on behalf of immigrants and LGBTQ people, and that she had done so within a biblical framework.

Preachers weren’t the only ones talking about the preacher who addressed the president. In a culture in which mainline Protestants are increasingly invisible, suddenly everyone was talking about what one of us had to say. My friend Erica—the first and best of the lifelong friends I made at the cathedral—was pulling out her Bishop Budde Fan Club T-shirt after working out at her local Jewish Community

Center. “I was suddenly standing half naked in the JCC locker room,” she said, “having a conversation about a *sermon* that everyone knew about with a bunch of half-naked middle-aged ladies.” Surreal and exciting.

Perhaps the president found it surreal, but he did not find it exciting, as he told reporters immediately afterward. It had been such a fundamentally faithful and polite sermon that I was naive enough to believe there wasn’t much for haters to hate on. I was *extraordinarily* naive. The president demanded an apology he will not receive, and a Republican congressman introduced a bill condemning Budde’s message, claiming that she “used her position inappropriately, promoting political bias instead of advocating the full counsel of biblical teaching.” Then there was the conservative pastor and provocateur Dale Partridge, who amid all the Bishop Budde confab took to social media to post a stunningly narrow-minded and hateful hot take: “A ‘woman pastor’ is a form of transgenderism [sic]. To say ‘woman pastor’ is like saying ‘woman king’ or a ‘woman husband’ or a ‘female father.’ They are categories that do not exist.”

By the end of that week I was glad it was my male co-pastor’s turn to preach in our Northeast Wisconsin pulpit. My mere existence as a “woman pastor” had become so inherently politicized in the public sphere that I had an irrational fear that no matter what came out of my mouth when I opened it—a word like fire or my own coffee-stained incisors—no one would be able to hear me. Pastor Nick wove quotes from Budde’s sermon into his own. I listened in the front pew with tears streaming down my cheeks—tears of grief and anxiety, gratitude and release. The first essay I ever wrote for the Young Clergy Women International magazine was about how crying in church made me feel like a little girl. It doesn’t bother me anymore.

Willimon once wrote that when someone tells him he’s preached a good sermon, he responds, “That remains to be seen.” A good sermon has to do more than entertain and inspire—or agitate and annoy—in the moment. What comes next? Will Budde’s sermon make a difference?

It would take a miracle to break the jagged ideology fueling the scapegoating of immigrants and transgender people. But I asked friends—clergy and lay—if they’ve actually done anything differently because of the words she spoke that day. One retired friend started volunteering to give immigrants rides in his community. Another collaborated with local partners to create a safe space for rattled LGTBQ youth to gather. Countless friends reported that when the barrage of executive

orders kicked in, they were emboldened to fight when they might otherwise have wilted. God numbers every hair on our heads and therefore may well know how many future US senators have been called after their hearts were strangely warmed during Budde's sermon.

I didn't get to be the one to beg the president to have mercy on people I love more than my own life, but this didn't make me feel powerless. Instead, because she did her work I feel freer to do mine. I can't help but abandon the script provided by the advocacy organization when I call my representatives. I revert to the plea *please have mercy* so often it's become a voicemail liturgy.

As for the next time it was my turn in the pulpit? I preached with all the joy and ferocity and authority that the Lord has been stoking in me through all these years of formation and proclamation. I am not ashamed to admit that the best lines in my sermons are still quotes. This time, it was from Black theologian and liturgist Cole Arthur Riley: "If your spirituality does not demand beauty and liberation for every person and piece of the cosmos, it is not God you are seeking, but a shallow ritual of self-soothing."

Lord, have mercy on us all.