



Proclaiming Salvation: Preaching Jesus as Savior

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Keep in mind that Jesus Christ has died for us and is risen from the dead. He is our saving Lord; he is joy for all ages.

—Canticle 13, *Lutheran Book of Worship*

WALTER TRUETT ANDERSON HIT THE MARK YEARS BACK WHEN HE TITLED HIS book, *Reality Isn't What It Used To Be*. He added the subtitle, "Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World" (1990). The overwhelming sense of rapid change that attends every aspect of contemporary life results in a sense of dislocation for many. This discomfiture, amplified by instantaneous communication with and 'real-time' connections to the whole world, forms a horizon for all our preaching

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Preaching engenders a living faith and living the faith. We proclaim a Savior who is present now in a real place among particular people. We preach a Christ of compassion for all in need and of resistance to all that gets in the way of the coming kingdom.

whether we speak directly to such dis-ease or not. Those intending to proclaim salvation in such a climate do well to keep the wonderful refrain above in mind.

The following ruminations about the particular setting of our preaching and proclaiming add up to what might be called a situational homiletic. The highlighted particularities, not anything new, have always been part of the dynamic of sin, grace, and the complex of relations between God's word and God's world and people.

Nonetheless, they have special importance in the context of late-twentieth-century, post-industrial North America. They mark peculiar obstacles to our hearing the gospel nowadays and therefore demand our attention. In one way or another, these obstacles confront all those who proclaim Jesus as Savior.

I. THE TIMELINESS OF PROCLAMATION—CHRIST'S *REAL* PRESENCE

Recently, Luther Seminary President David Tiede prefaced a chapel talk by saying that a verse from Acts, which he had read many times previously, caught his eye "as if it had never been there before!" During that same worship week, Professor Jim Burtness also remarked on the *viva vox evangelii* saying, "the text continues to unfold because God continues to live, the Spirit continues to work, Jesus is risen." Such thoughts capture experiences familiar to believers everywhere. Even those who know scripture best, perhaps especially those, are often surprised by it. We read along in familiar biblical territory, and something strikes us anew. God's word works that way. Proclaimers of salvation have long known that.

Set these examples right alongside the universal pastoral experience of pulling out old sermon notes to find they just don't fit anymore. You can't recall preaching bad sermons at the time, but going over them again you wonder how you got away with them before. This isn't merely the hindsight of that greater pastoral wisdom that comes with age or increased homiletic skill. Something *has* changed, rendering what was once said in all earnestness practically worthless in the new setting.

Looking back, I suspect that some of my best sermons have been funeral sermons. Those God-words intended for one particular sinner's dying and as comfort to one grieving family still have a freshness about them. Their very concreteness seems to have spared them from the awful temptation to preach eternal, unchanging nuggets of truth as gospel. These experiences point to that one thing about redemption that we all know full well. When it comes to salvation, we're always talking present tense. For us, this side of death, there is no true past tense to redemption; this is an event now occurring. This really is the day of salvation! Of course, salvation has a history, but our proclamation attends to a present reality.

Sometimes folks challenge us with the question, "Have you been saved?" The Bible sets the question differently. First Corinthians reads, "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." That's us—we are part of the *being saved* in the world community of Jesus Christ. The Athanasian Creed repeats a present-

tense phrase over and over, “Whoever would be saved—whoever wants to be saved.” Proclamation of Jesus Christ as Savior has to do with a living faith and living the faith.

Writing a guest editorial for Luther Seminary’s student newspaper, Professor Jim Boyce said, “One of my favorite definitions of ‘spirituality’ is the ‘disciplined attention to the daily process of conversion in us.’” That resonates as a reminder of Luther’s insistence on baptism as daily renewal. Christ’s real presence means he is truly present to us. Such a living reality certainly has past, present, and future dimensions. Indeed, human beings, thrown into time, attend all their experiences under the aspects of retention, attention, and protention—from remembrance in one direction to hope in the other. But preaching is vital *occasional* theology. A sermon is a very particular word appropriate to the being saved in the world community of Christ here and now, here and new.

The scandalous particularity of Jesus Christ, ever present with us, presses gospel proclamation in this direction. This may be why we can’t get away with just one sermon. Martin Luther said that if not for sin only one hearing of the word would be necessary to bring the world to faith. But faithful sinners like us need always to be evangelized. Indeed, we need to hear the gospel again and again because of our temporality, not just because of our sinfulness. This is a fundamental truth about our redemption, so obvious that I hardly paid it enough attention in my days as a parish pastor.

II. THE LOCUS OF PROCLAMATION— CHRIST’S IMMANENCE (AND IMMINENCE?)

We always preach in/to a particular time and place. Good sermons are without fail those that are momentous—full of the moment. Some preachers speak of the process of preparing sermons as “waiting for God to lay something [the right thing, presumably] on their hearts.” It is not that those preachers don’t know the Bible, making them at a loss for a text, a pericope, a Bible story. What they mean to say is that their proclamation is *bound* to be time-conditioned. Imagine pastoring a congregation in a town where a plant closing has laid off workers, devastating many member families. Do you suppose you might mention that in next Sunday’s sermon? Or think of a tragic death, a whole parish suddenly thrown into grief. Might it be good to speak a word to such loss? These are rhetorical questions. Of course, we’d preach in/to those situations. That’s precisely the point. But the point remains even when nothing dramatic has happened during the week. Preachers earn their keep in careful, constant reflection on their situation and keen, sustained observation of the present.

Robert Jenson declares:

Since the gospel thus always has and agitates a conflicted conceptual history of its own, the theological question has a temporal seam: Given what we *have* heard and seen as gospel, what *shall* we now say and enact that the gospel may be spo-

ken? It is in the seam between these questions that there must be thinking, that theology is actual as “hermeneutic.”¹

Minister theologians move into that seam as they take to pulpits every Sunday—or whenever—preaching Jesus. And the struggle to make sense of and grasp God’s word for us *right now* is transparent in that movement. There is a tension building here. Granted, we don’t have a choice about particularity if we want to proclaim Jesus as Savior. But this no-option gospel situation puts preachers in a tough spot. In spelling out this conundrum, Douglas John Hall noted that in the drive to contextualize theological education, seminary studies now resonate to the observation that our being saved is something of the moment, a present reality. But Hall also warned of a cultural addiction to “now-ism.”² That pressure for instant relevance has long afflicted proclamation too, trapping preachers in a homiletic version of the philosopher’s eternal now. This is not just the fusion of past, present, and future within the flow of lived experience, but loss of the then-and-now-and-then character of salvation. So while the gospel cannot be unrelated to the living of our days, such relatedness also runs the risk of lopping off remembrance and hope from the dynamic of faith. Where eschatological vision is lost, the drama, even the promise, of salvation disappears. We have all heard sermons that have left us wondering “Is that all there is?” Did Jesus become obedient unto death for that?

Attention to the immediate situation, which is critical, must not foreshorten our vision to such an extent that we lose sight of the *telos* of creation—the culminating end of all things in God. Preachers today are greatly helped in this regard by contemporary theology’s renewed interest in the triune God. Elizabeth Johnson has written in a recent article, “Today we are harvesting the fruit of the mid-twentieth-century rediscovery by Karl Barth and Karl Rahner of the linkage between the doctrine of the Trinity and the mystery of salvation.”³ Recalling Rahner’s axiom, “the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity,” she says,

the point being made is that there are not two Gods, one made known in revelation and one totally different. Rather, God really is as we have experienced God to be in Jesus through the Spirit. In other words, we are not duped. The concrete saving ways that God is given to us in history point indirectly to the three interrelated ways of existing within God’s own life.⁴

Johnson lifts up a marvelous line from Catherine LaCugna: “We do not know a shadow image of God but the real living God of Jesus Christ in their Spirit. The God who saves—this is God.”⁵ We do preach in/to a particular time. We also preach in/to

¹Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Triune God* (New York: Oxford, 1997) 16.

²Douglas John Hall, “The Contextuality of Christian Theology” (paper presented at the regional meeting of the American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature, St. Paul, MN, April 1998).

³Elizabeth Johnson, “Trinity: To Let the Symbol Sing Again,” *Theology Today* 54 (1997) 303.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

a particular place. We recognize that social location is decisive. Hall said, “What was gospel in one *topos*, could become a barrier to truth orientation in another.”⁶ We change our sermons when we variously preach in inner-city congregations, rural parishes, small towns, and suburbs. The theological critiques of gender, race, and culture that characterize our day are all well known, a welcome breath of fresh air. Most of us by now have been broken of the habit of speaking for every one, or of preaching as if we could.

With many others, I have often yielded to the temptation to preach to/about the world in general. But the world is never general. There are no generic human beings, only specific ones—and Christians tend to come the same way. Yet the hermeneutics of suspicion that has called attention to this fact has also been sedimented in some instances into sharp divisions and permanently installed segregation. Our best occasional preaching, as particular as it must be, must not obscure gospel concern for the whole and the global character and mission of the church.

Already, even now, every day, Christ is bringing about eternal purpose. David Buttrick, in his little book, *Preaching Jesus Christ*, cautions, “If all we can do is hawk a personal savior in our preaching, then we deny the Scripture and tumble toward outright heresy.”⁷ If Jesus Christ is the only Savior of the world (and we are surely in no position to say otherwise), then the salvation he brings is bigger than we can ever know on our own, by ourselves. And just so, Jesus Christ must be preached as a world-class Savior!

Salvation preachers seek global perspective, want to glimpse the *missio Dei*. They ask after the world’s end, not just their own. What is the consummation of all things? Jesus is joy for ages to come. We sing Christ for the world. Preachers are charged with nothing less than opening hearers of the word to the work of Christ everywhere. We have a part in letting them in on the whole of Christian community, allowing them to rejoice and hope with those in every nation, race, and condition who are also being saved in Jesus’ name.

Preachers need to reclaim Jesus’ vision of the kingdom of God, for the apocalyptic character of his message shatters the grip time and place, here and now, have on us. As Buttrick warns, “When Christ is separated from apocalyptic consciousness, the gospel can thin out until we are left with little more than a cardboard cut-out Jesus to be hawked by a pulpit sales force.”⁸ In another fine work, *The Mystery and the Passion*, Buttrick raises the homiletic stakes again:

In sermons we hold up the cross and in its reflection understand the width and depth of sin in the human world. And still we turn to resurrection as a witness to our hope in the promised power of God. We explore the cross trying to connect the passion of Christ with our own experience of being saved. We search the

⁶Hall, “Contextuality.”

⁷David Buttrick, *Preaching Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988) 48-49.

⁸*Ibid.*, 20.

whole Christ event trying to grasp the mystery of God's eternal love. Like the first Christian theological explorers, we investigate God's activity, tracing mysterious movements of grace through all human time and space. How can Christian preaching ever be glib? The gospel can be turned into trivia only by an act of deliberate homiletic sinfulness. To preach the gospel is to do theology at a profound, if quite practical, level.⁹

As joy for all ages, Christ comes to us ever anew. His real presence in the word is complex, mysterious, full of import, symbolically profound, hard to hold. Yet faith seeks understanding; the church reflects on its experience of that reality. Faith will not be silent; we are compelled to proclaim salvation and our savior. And "somehow," Buttrick says, "in our day the pulpit must once more communicate Christ, a Christ who displays complex humanity and yet the fullness of light that is God. The question: How?"¹⁰ That is the question alright! One I'm not so much concerned to answer, as to leave open. This isn't a new question; preachers have always pondered the question. It needs pondering anew.

III. THE CHARACTER OF PROCLAMATION—THE IMAGE OF CHRIST

One direction Buttrick's own pondering takes raises another question, What Christ-image are we holding out to congregation and community? What christological portraiture undergirds our proclamation nowadays? Buttrick pinpoints one he often sees—don't we all?—"Jesus as our caring therapist." We've been warned about this so-called savior before. One, as Buttrick says, who purports to "save by 'acceptance' and so enable us to accept ourselves, to have a 'positive self-image' and be happy."¹¹ Jesus cares. Jesus is sensitive. Jesus understands me. That's a rhetorical caricature, to be sure. But, isn't this, without trivialization, what we must also preach? If this image plays too much into the triumph of the therapeutic, rampant in our day, is there not also an element of gospel truth in it that we dare not let go?

Years ago Frank Lake, in his massive *Clinical Theology*, recognized that the intrinsic psychological and ontological difficulties presented by real neurotics, paranoids, andro-erotics, and schizophrenics are great in themselves. Without reducing sin to psychopathology, or vice-versa, Lake was convinced, however, that these clinical problems

must not be made an excuse in the church for 'passing the buck' to the doctors. The Lord Jesus promised rest and refreshment to the weary and heavy laden. He gave, for all time, spiritual food and drink to banish hunger and thirst. In Him, the persecuted are to be happy, the spiritually impoverished are to be happy, the hungry for right relationships are to be happy. The loveless are to be given the joy of living in love again, the outcast and the harlot are welcomed into the fellowship of the divine family. All these things Christ offered and much more. If the

⁹David Buttrick, *The Mystery and the Passion: A Homiletic Reading of the Gospel Traditions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 11.

¹⁰Buttrick, *Preaching*, 21.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 27.

Church cannot now communicate what her Lord still offers, she should tread more humbly in claiming to represent Him. His Cross, Passion and Resurrection must become again central to all our thinking. Obedience to his word must be seen to take us much farther away from the psychological types we are when we join His church than is at present common.¹²

Proclaimers nowadays are hit with a double-whammy. There is the obvious problem of reducing redemption to psychotherapy, touting the therapist Jesus as facile remedy. But psychotherapy itself has also been trivialized. A curmudgeonly psychiatrist named Frank Pittman wrote of this in an article, "It's Not My Fault!" Pittman recognizes that terrible things do happen to people, and that, in psychotherapeutic terms, victims are sometimes quite literally crippled by emotional trauma. But he goes on to say,

There are no qualifying exams for victims, not even any standards—victimhood is a self-designation. You get to be a victim just by announcing it to *People* magazine, a therapist or a stranger on a bus. Anyone can qualify and get the cherished badge that says, "I'm a victim; I don't have to do my share. And it's your fault, not mine." The percentage of self-ordained victims has become alarmingly high these days now that we no longer distinguish between disaster and inconvenience, between tragedy and unpleasantness. The Adult Child movement, by declaring practically everyone to be a victim of imperfect parenting and therefore eligible for lifelong, self-absorbed irresponsibility, has trivialized real suffering and made psychic invalids of those who once had a bad day.¹³

An overstatement? Yes. But in a culture, our culture, in which suffering is so hopelessly misunderstood, the pressure on preachers to turn Jesus into a tonic for even the most trivial of ailments is enormous. The counter to this surely is not to denounce Christ as too caring, too sympathetic, and too understanding, but rather to couple Christ's powerful compassion with the equally powerful resistance always present in Jesus too. The image that emerges of our Savior from scripture is not just as one who cares for me and knows me and understands me, but one who does the same for all those others I don't much care for, or know, or understand.

With Christ there is also always an element of refusal with which preachers must reckon (just as the first evangelists obviously did). Walter Brueggemann calls this "preaching a sub-version."¹⁴ Jesus' whole life is a record of resistance, of controversy. While literally upsetting the tables of the temple hucksters, Jesus' parables and aphorisms also overturned the cultural commonplaces and certainties of his day. Because he never sought social inclusion, Jesus found himself at liberty to eat with sinners and outcasts, the excluded.

This free Jesus preached the love of God that freely saves sinners, and he preached the flip side too—resistance to all forms of self-justification, whether so-

¹²Frank Lake, *Clinical Theology: A Theological and Psychiatric Basis to Clinical Pastoral Care* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1966) 1160.

¹³Frank Pittman, "It's Not My Fault!" *Family Therapy Networker* (January/February 1982) 60-61.

¹⁴Walter Brueggemann, "Preaching a Sub-Version," *Theology Today* 55 (1998) 195-212.

cial, political, economic, academic, or ecclesiastical. As Walter Wink has said, salvation proclaimers engage the powers and principalities of the world. We resist with the resistance of Christ. Members of our congregations, campuses, and communities know terrible pressures to buy into lifestyles touted by advertising and peer pressure as essential to being somebody and getting somewhere.

In the face of the powerful forces of social elitism, even in our churches, we preach a Christ whose care shows God's love for all; but we also preach a Christ who doesn't care what we think, who lives outside all social and political and ethnic and gender correctness and the self-justification they promise. Lowell Erdahl, former bishop of the ELCA's Saint Paul Area Synod, liked to say that forgiveness concerns not only those things of which we are most ashamed but also those things of which we are most proud. The Christ we preach insists on solidarity with all sinners, all who genuinely suffer, and by grace through faith alone draws us into that solidarity with himself.

Preachers are aided in proclaiming Christ's compassion and resistance today by the important reflections of many women preachers and theologians. Rebecca Chopp says:

In the discourses of feminist theology, proclamation is radically immanent in the world existing in the margins and gaps of present structures, in the dances and laughter of women as well as in the visions and hopes of the poor, in the desires for love and relatedness of the bourgeoisie, in the poetry and dreams of people of color. Proclamation comprises new visions of the main body, visions of earth, night, cave; images that give, gingerly and tentatively, words of freedom to freely speak.¹⁵

Chopp goes on, "Many women have found satisfaction in expressing their piety and knowledge of God in the language of caring for and being with rather than *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, wholly other and ultimate concern. The nexus of religious experiences, at least for many women, is in and through relationships, friends, families, memories of the dead." She asks, "Could the vision of God today—in a day desperate for care, sustenance, relationality, and physicality—come from a woman's day-to-day walk with her God?"¹⁶ Such accounts are a vital, rich resource of non-trivial imagery for all preachers, female and male, to speak profoundly, boldly, even recklessly, of God's saving love for the world in Jesus Christ.

We do keep in mind that Jesus Christ has died for us and is risen from the dead, our saving Lord, our joy for all ages. We find ourselves hearers of the word, and not preachers only. And David Buttrick sounds this encouraging pulpit call:

There is another presence of Christ we should mention: *a presence of Christ to preachers!* Think of being allowed to explore the mystery of Jesus Christ week after week. And, even more, think of having the Word of Christ on our lips. We preachers live preoccupied with the symbol of Jesus Christ and, as we preach,

¹⁵Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 99.

¹⁶Ibid., 119-120.

share his ministry. No matter how crass we may be, the gain, indeed the grace, is ours. Ministers are apt to be somewhat crass: we preachers live close to earthy realities, to births and to deaths; we are told too many human secrets; we find trouble on our doorsteps every day. Yet as we live with Christ Jesus, speaking the Word and doing the Sacraments, we can be cheered by his near presence. Most people are surprisingly improved in the company of Jesus Christ!¹⁷ ⊕

¹⁷Buttrick, *Preaching*, 84-85.