



Texts in Context

John's Voice and the Church's Preaching

GAIL R. O'DAY

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN OCCUPIES AN OFTEN UNCOMFORTABLE PLACE IN THE preaching life of a lectionary-based church. We learn from our earliest days of Sunday School that there are four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We learn counting songs that reinforce that “four are the gospel-makers.” Yet the church follows a three-year lectionary cycle that allots individual years for Matthew (A), Mark (B), and Luke (C), with no year for John. Four may be the gospel-makers, but it sometimes seems like “three are the gospel-preachers”! If one studies the internal structure of each of the three years, rather than just the external structure (Matthew/Mark/Luke), John's place as “gospel-maker” begins to reassert itself. In all three years of the lectionary cycle, John provides the readings for the highest liturgical days and seasons: in all three years, the gospel lesson for Christmas Day (John 1:1-14) and the gospels for all the days of Holy Week are from John. The gospel lesson for the 4th, 5th, 6th, and 7th Sundays of Easter and Pentecost Sunday in all three cycles are from John, and in Year C, the gospel lesson for all the Sundays of Easter can be from John. Readings from John provide the gospel lesson for half the Sundays in Lent, Years A and B.¹

This distinction between how Matthew, Mark, and Luke are used in the lectionary and how John is used creates a dilemma for the preacher that makes an on-

¹This tabulation of lessons is from the Revised Common Lectionary.

The lectionary devotes no year to John's Gospel, but the preacher can provide the church with John's important and distinctive voice by focusing on it at Christmas, Lent, and Easter.

going preaching ministry more difficult. In Year A, for example, on the Sundays between Pentecost and Christ the King, twenty-five different gospel lessons from Matthew occur. Since during ordinary time, the lectionary follows the practice of *lectio continua* (continuous reading), these lessons follow the order of the Matthean narrative. When one adds to this the continuous gospel readings for the Sundays between Epiphany and Lent as well as the readings from Matthew that punctuate Advent and Lent, the preacher and congregation are exposed to a large swath of Matthew. From Sunday to Sunday, a common vocabulary shared by Matthew, the preacher, and the congregation begins to develop—one can remember what Jesus said or did in the story from Matthew that was read the preceding Sunday, and one can anticipate the story that will be read the next Sunday. Preacher and congregation alike can enter into the narrative and theological worlds of Matthew: learning Matthew's particular emphases, participating in Matthew's vision for the church, recognizing words that recur from lesson to lesson. The preacher does not have to relearn Matthew's voice each Sunday, but as the lectionary year runs its course, preacher and congregation begin to inhabit Matthew's voice (or Mark's or Luke's, in their respective years), so that it is possible to think of Matthew as the resident "gospel-maker" for a year in a congregation's life. The congregation acquires a common voice, shaped in part by the communal engagement with Matthew throughout the liturgical year.

This is simply not the case with John. Because John is scattered through each lectionary cycle and occurs almost exclusively in the high liturgical seasons, there is no sense of a continuous reading of John.² The pattern of John's use in the lectionary makes it clear that John is held to be a significant voice. At the moments of greatest theological intensity in the worship life of the church (e.g., Christmas, Lent, Easter), it seems that the church relies on John's voice to move to the heart of the matter. But this pattern also means that John remains a singular voice, one that preacher and congregation continually have to relearn. Preacher and congregation are not given the chance to inhabit John's voice as they are with the other three gospels, so that John's voice often feels more like that of a guest than that of the congregation's resident "gospel-maker."

This is not to say that John is not a beloved guest, for it clearly is. At both weddings and funerals, times of greatest pastoral and human intimacy in the church, lessons from John usually figure prominently: John 2:1-11 at weddings, and John 14:1-4 at funerals. But such situation-specific encounters with John in the preaching life of the church still are selective moments without the frame of an ongoing conversation. Because preacher and congregation do not have the opportunity to engage in regular, continuous readings of John, the readings from John, occurring as they do on the highest and most solemn occasions, become a little bit like the good china—taken out for special occasions and admired, but also kept at a re-

²The one exception to this is in Year B, where five lessons from John 6 are read consecutively (Pentecost 7-11), functioning almost as a supplement to Mark's story of the feeding of the five thousand.

spectful distance, as if real use might somehow diminish their value. This pattern of John's use in the lectionary and the life of the church deprives preacher and congregation of the chance to engage in communal conversation with John in the same way that it is possible to engage in communal conversation with Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Preacher and congregation are not able to inhabit John's voice.

As a result, each Sunday's encounter with a Johannine text can become a kind of starting over—relearning the vocabulary, the distinctive emphases, John's vision for church and world. The goal of this article is to facilitate the preacher's habitation of John's voice by highlighting some of its distinctive timbres, cadences, and vocal patterns. I have chosen to focus on what John's voice brings to the liturgical and preaching conversation in three major seasons where John appears in the lectionary: Christmas Day, Lent, and Easter.

I. THE GOSPEL OF JOHN AS NEVER-ENDING CONVERSATION (CHRISTMAS DAY)

One of the traits of John's voice that often confounds the preacher who knows John primarily through the lectionary is the way that it repeats itself. Unlike, for example, the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), in which Jesus speaks a succession of discrete teachings and exhortations, the Jesus of John repeats the same teachings and the same words over and over again. This makes the Gospel of John a wonderful teaching text for introductory Greek students, because they are so quickly able to recognize its vocabulary and translate Greek drawn from many different parts of the gospel. This same repetition of vocabulary and themes can be frustrating, though, for the preacher who has been trained by the voices of Matthew, Mark, and Luke to expect a strict linear progression in the unfolding of the story. Luke, for example, prides itself on being an orderly account (Luke 1:1-4), and reads like the classic definition of a narrative, with a clearly demarcated beginning, middle, and end.

Think of the difference between climbing a conventional staircase in a multi-story building and climbing a spiral staircase. When climbing a conventional staircase, there is an orderly sense of movement upward. Each half, or sometimes even quarter, level of climbing is marked by a landing, from which one moves upward to the next landing. The distinct segments of the journey are clear. When climbing a circular staircase, by contrast, there are no landings, no clear demarcation of levels. If you look through the well of a circular staircase as you are climbing, you have a full view of where you have been and where you are going—all at any single moment of the climb. The effect can be dizzying. The conventional staircase and the spiral staircase have the same goal—to move you upward through the building—but the experience of climbing these two different types of staircases is completely different.

The experience of reading John is similar to that of climbing a spiral staircase. At any given point in reading the gospel, one has the same sense that comes from

peering down the well of a circular staircase in the middle of climbing up—you can see all the steps you have already taken, but they begin to take on different depths and perspective the further up the staircase you climb. And just as all the curves and turns tend to begin to blend together, making the distinction between levels less clear, the Gospel of John also seems to fold and turn back on itself in the unfolding of its story of Jesus.

The reader is placed on this spiral staircase from the opening verses of the gospel. The prologue, John 1:1-18, opens with words that seem fairly straightforward for the start of a story, “In the beginning.” It quickly becomes clear, however, that these words do not introduce a linear movement from beginning through the middle to the end. Instead they introduce a poetic evocation of the entire story of the gospel, so that the reader is invited to embrace all of the gospel’s major themes in its opening verses. Verses 1-2 (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God”) are an excellent example of the spiraling that characterizes so much of the way the gospel unfolds. The last phrase repeats what has already been said in v. 1, yet it is somehow more than repetition. Verse 2 does not simply say in one phrase what is said in v. 1 in three phrases, because the three phrases of v. 1 linger for the reader when he or she reads v. 2, so that all of the words resound together. To abstract the meaning of these two verses apart from their poetic formulation is impossible. The Fourth Evangelist does want to announce something about God and the Word in these opening verses—that the two exist in intimate union—but he chooses to do so in a form that embodies that union, so that the reader cannot abstract the meaning from the way in which it is announced. It would be like straightening out a spiral staircase: one could accomplish that feat, but when one is finished, the spiral staircase and the experience of climbing it have been destroyed.

In Matthew and Luke, the infancy narratives clearly demarcate the beginning from the rest of the gospel, but John does not operate with such clean divisions. Instead, in the opening eighteen verses of John, the reader is told the story of the Word’s advent into the world not once, but three times: vv. 1-5, 10-13, 14-18. Each of these versions of this story is distinctive in its own way, yet each also overlaps and circles back on the other, so that a linear outline of the contents of the prologue is almost impossible. Moreover, these evocations of the story of the Word do not just tell the beginning, but point the reader to the whole span of the story: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (v. 5); “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God...” (v. 13); “From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace” (v. 16). The reader is not eased into the story, but is placed in what seems to be almost simultaneously beginning, middle, and end. For John, one can only know the story of Jesus as a whole. At any point in its unfolding, one needs to be able to look backward and forward. There is nothing incremental about the gospel proclamation, because at every moment of the Jesus story, Jesus is revealing the presence of God

to the world (“No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made God known,” v. 18).

The all-encompassing nature of the conversation in which John immediately immerses the reader in the prologue presents a challenge for the lectionary preacher who is asked to preach John 1:1-14 on Christmas Day. The exegetical task with John 1:1-14 is enormous, in large part because of the circularity of its language and theological assumptions. The key in working with this text is to recognize that one cannot understand or experience the prologue without having experienced the entire gospel.³ By opening his gospel with a text that the reader can grasp most fully at the end, rather than the beginning, the Fourth Evangelist is challenging many of our reading assumptions (and certainly much of the way we go about sermon preparation). When climbing a conventional staircase, we climb to get to where we are going, so that the staircase and the climb is primarily functional. Once we arrive at the floor we want, we exit the staircase, its function having been accomplished. We often read this way—the words on the page are there to supply us with information, and once we have gotten what we are looking for, we leave the words, their function having been accomplished. The Fourth Evangelist has constructed a gospel that compels us to read another way. The reader of John is asked not to leave earlier episodes of the gospel behind, but to carry them along, because each new section of the gospel deepens what has preceded it while at the same time opening possibilities for what is still to come.

The prologue has a distinctive introductory function—it celebrates much of what is to follow in the gospel and orients the reader to its perspective on the Jesus story. But the prologue also becomes a refrain that echoes throughout the gospel, and the reader’s experience of the prologue and the rest of the gospel is enhanced when those echoes are heeded. For example, when Jesus and Nicodemus talk about new birth (John 3), this conversation takes on deeper theological resonances when read alongside the promises of 1:13 (“he gave power to become children of God”). John 3 is no longer an individual incident in Jesus’ ministry, but belongs to an ongoing theological conversation in the gospel. When Jesus says, “I am the light of the world” (8:12), this saying takes on additional meaning when read alongside 1:3-9. At the end of the gospel, when Jesus says to Mary, “But go to my brothers and sisters and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and your God’” (20:17), these words, celebrative enough in their immediate context of the resurrection, take on even deeper resonances when the reader remembers the promises of 1:13 and the intimacy between Father and Son to which the prologue gives the most vivid expression (1:18). Jesus’ words in 20:17 include the disciples (and by extension, later Christian communities) in that intimate relationship.

As daunting as the sweep of the prologue is to the Christmas Day preacher, it also has something vital and apt to offer. Unlike the infancy narratives of Matthew

³When I studied John in seminary, my professor, the late George MacRae, did not teach the prologue until the end of the semester, so that we could see the way it embodied all the major emphases of the gospel.

and Luke, which draw the church's attention at Christmas to a very particular point of beginning, the Johannine prologue draws the church's attention to the ways in which the beginning is completely inseparable from the rest of the story. The good news of Christmas thus is transformed from a limited point in time and one particular story into part of a never-ending conversation. If the preacher is able to recognize that, when interpreting the prologue, he or she is not simply trying to interpret a single text but is creating a place for this whole story, then the good news of John for Christmas can be heard. The prologue does celebrate the joy of beginnings, but the entire gospel narrative reminds us that good beginnings are the ones that have no end. The Gospel of John spirals for a reason: so that as we move through its stories, we are always able simultaneously to locate ourselves at the beginning. John does not allow us to leave anything behind, but all of the Jesus story is present at any given moment. The Christmas preacher is asked to enter this conversation. It is a conversation that wholly embodies the good news of Christmas: God-with-us.

II. THE GOSPEL OF JOHN AS COMMUNAL CONVERSATION (LENT)

A second trait of the Gospel of John that can confound the preacher who visits John only through the lectionary is the number of speeches and conversations that the gospel narrates. Preacher and congregation alike can have the sense of drowning in an unending stream of words. Unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke, where teachings of Jesus are regularly balanced by stories about Jesus, John consists primarily of speaking. John narrates many events that resemble those found in the other three gospels—the healing of the paralytic in John 5, the healing of the man born blind in John 9, the raising of Lazarus in John 11, for example—but unlike their synoptic counterparts, in John the event and the conversation that precedes and follows are inseparable.

Much contemporary preaching tends to emphasize storytelling that is closer to the model of storytelling in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Preachers tell stories to a congregation, whether biblical stories or stories from the preacher's own life and experience, with the hope that the listeners will then draw an analogy between their own lives and the story that is being told. In such an approach to storytelling, the reader or listener is often placed in the position of observer or bystander, given something to look at, but not necessarily given anything to do. John's way of storytelling is quite different from that. John does not tell stories *to* his readers, positioning them as passive recipients of a good story, but instead tells stories *for* and *with* his readers. The reader experiences almost nothing secondhand. The reader is not positioned to listen to a narrator's summary of Jesus' teaching (e.g., "With many such parables he spoke to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples," Mark 4:33-34), but is instead positioned to participate in the many conversations that Jesus has throughout the gospel. The reader is not told *about* Jesus' conversa-

tions, but is invited to hear Jesus' words as if he or she were Jesus' conversation partner. In almost every gospel story, the reader can understand himself or herself as directly involved in the story.

One of the most striking aspects of the conversations and speeches that are narrated in John is the amount of space devoted to give and take between Jesus and his conversation partners. This give and take frequently takes the form of questions and answers, but it also is characterized by word play, misunderstanding, and figurative speech. The Fourth Evangelist is willing to put the dynamics of conversation on display in the gospel, not just the results of conversation. For example, in Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4:5-42, Lent 3, Year A), the reader is privileged to watch the full evolution of this conversation and the relationship between the two characters. The Samaritan woman begins the conversation as someone who is incredulous that Jesus would have violated social and cultural protocol to ask her for a drink of water (4:9) and ends as one who bears witness to Jesus to her townspeople (4:29). In the classic storytelling model, one might be tempted to think that this digest of the plot is "the point," and that what John gives us here is a story of a successful evangelistic mission—one more disciple for Jesus. But to rely on such a digest as a guide to appropriating this passage in the life of the church would be a mistake. The Fourth Evangelist could have presented the story that way had he chosen to. The story of the healing of the royal official's son that follows in 4:46-52, which is told quite succinctly by Johannine standards, shows that the Fourth Evangelist can tell a story in a way that more closely resembles the method of the other gospels. But he does not choose to do so, which makes it all the more crucial that the dynamics of the conversation be taken seriously. John is less interested in having the reader know what happened than in having the reader participate in what is happening.

When preacher and congregation look more closely at what is happening in John 4:5-42, the church can experience anew what it means to be in relationship with Jesus. The woman's journey can become the congregation's journey, as the questions she voices become the questions one would like to voice: How can Jesus do the things he does? How do we understand our worship traditions in light of the new promises of Jesus (4:20-24)? What can we say when we feel we are in the presence of God but are not completely sure how we can or should name it (4:25, 29)? The more one is able to stay with the conversation, the more clear it becomes that the goal of reading is not simply about arriving, but is about what one sees along the way. Similarly, the goal of relationship with Jesus may not simply be about arriving at a particular goal but about what one sees along the way.

The variety of conversations that Jesus conducts in John means that the attentive reader of the gospel sees Jesus through multiple sets of eyes and hears Jesus witnessed to through a variety of voices. The voices range from the enthusiastic confessions of Jesus' disciples after their first encounter with him (1:35-51) to their grumblings and confusion as their days with Jesus increase (e.g., 6:60; 16:18). The

voices range from the blind man in John 9 to Mary and Martha in John 11. They range from crowds who are curious about Jesus to religious leaders who are antagonistic towards him. This multiplicity of voices means that the gospel is itself a conversation, in which the reader is invited to locate himself or herself.

Participation in this conversation also means that the characters' relationships with Jesus also become the reader's own. This is not always an easy fit, because many of the conversations that Jesus has with gospel characters revolve around the basic issues of faith and response to the presence of God in the world. Because the Gospel of John is written in such a way that the reader is drawn into its stories as a participant, the reader is also drawn into the demands for response that characterize Jesus' encounters. Jesus says to Nicodemus, "If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?" (3:12). Since the reader may not have had any easier time than Nicodemus in sorting through Jesus' teachings about being born of water and the Spirit, the reader, too, stands implicated by Jesus' question. When Jesus asks the man born blind, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" (9:35), this, too, becomes a question for the reader. It is not enough that the blind man can eventually answer that question (9:38); the reader must decide how to answer it as well.

In John, judgment is not imposed from above or without, but self-judgment occurs in people's response to Jesus ("And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds are evil" [3:19]; "Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind'" [9:39]). This demand for a response from the reader is one of the things that make texts from John so appropriate in Lent. The preacher does not need to work to fit John into the demands of the Lenten discipline, or manufacture questions of self-examination. The Johannine texts already lead the reader in conversations of self-examination and reflection, as the reader moves with the characters in their encounters with Jesus. John constantly asks the reader to reorient himself or herself to the presence of God embodied in Jesus and to the promises of God enacted by Jesus. John invites the congregation to participate in this ongoing conversation of self-examination and reflection. It is a conversation for the whole worshiping community, already available and waiting in the pages of the Gospel of John.

III. THE GOSPEL OF JOHN AS CELEBRATIVE CONVERSATION (EASTER)

A third trait that can confound the preacher who knows John primarily through the lectionary is the voice of Jesus that resounds through its pages. The Johannine Jesus rarely speaks in parables or in discrete, short teaching units, as he does in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but instead speaks most frequently in lengthy monologues: e.g., John 5:19-47; 6:35-59; 8:12-30; 10:1-18, 22-30. The most well-known, and longest, of Jesus' speeches is the farewell discourse, in which Jesus speaks to his disciples on the eve of his death. The farewell discourse runs from

13:31-16:33, followed by Jesus' prayer (17:1-24), which also has a monological cast. The disciples interrupt Jesus a few times with questions (e.g., 14:8, 22), but essentially it is the solo voice of Jesus that dominates these chapters.

This solo voice may not be the voice that readers whose ears are attuned to the voices of Matthew, Mark, and Luke expect. One of the most well-known sayings of Jesus about his death from those gospels is his prayer in Gethsemane that the cup may pass from him if it is God's will (Mark 14:36 and parallels). This scene is often known as "the agony in the garden," and as beloved as this scene in the life of Jesus is, it has nothing to do with the Jesus who speaks on the eve of his death in John. The Jesus who speaks in the farewell discourse experiences no agony as his death approaches but instead embodies his proclamation of John 10:18: "No one takes it [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down and power to take it up again." Jesus lays down his life as an act of love—for his friends, as he will teach his disciples this night (15:12), and for God (10:17). It is an act that embodies the fullness of this love (13:1), and so agony of any sort would be incomprehensible. Jesus' death is his gift, which he gives gladly and freely.

Jesus' ultimate act of love in his death provides the context for understanding the voice of Jesus that speaks in and through the farewell discourse. His concern on this night is the crisis that his death and subsequent absence from his followers will cause for them. Repeatedly in the farewell discourse Jesus speaks words of consolation, assurance, and comfort, teaching the disciples that what they have learned of God from Jesus' life will still be available to them through the gift of the Paraclete (14:26; 15:26; 16:7, 12-15). Jesus anticipates the disciples' need, and so in the moments before his arrest, trial, and death he offers them words of assurance that will meet that need.

As Jesus speaks these words of assurance, sometimes Jesus speaks of his death and departure as future (14:29), but sometimes he seems to speak of it as if it were already accomplished (14:30; 16:27, 33). This shift in temporal perspective can be confusing to the reader, but it is the hallmark of the pastoral and theological genius of the discourse.⁴ It is also the key for preacher and congregation who are invited to live in these words in the Easter season. The governing perspective of the farewell discourse is Jesus' final word before his prayer: "But take courage; I have overcome the world" (16:33). Jesus does not offer words of assurance to the disciples based on wishful thinking or stoic encouragement. Jesus offers words of assurance grounded in Jesus' unshaking confidence that his death is an act of victory, that the love that his gift of his life demonstrates is more powerful than any evil the world can put up against him ("I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of the world is coming. He has no power over me, but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father" [14:30-31]). Jesus' confidence in his victory over the world in his death, resurrection, and ascension sets the context for every word that he speaks. It is therefore possible to understand the

⁴See Gail R. O'Day, "I Have Overcome the World' (John 16:33)," *Semeia* 53 (1991) 153-166.

voice of Jesus that speaks in the farewell discourse (and in 10:11-18, 22-30) as the voice of the risen Jesus.

Jesus' words may be placed in the story at the evening meal before his death, but they do not have their true home at that meal. The confidence and assurance to which Jesus summons his disciples is a courage and assurance that reflects the eschatological reality of the triumph of God's love. The Fourth Evangelist's narrative genius was to put those words where the disciples and the readers would need them most—at the place where the future and God's presence in it seems most bleak. The Johannine Jesus addresses the disciples' present (Jesus' impending death and their sense of abandonment) with words that are firmly grounded in God's future. Who they are and what they will become is not up for grabs, but is secure in God's victory. The voice of the risen Jesus echoes around the supper table to remind the disciples that the future for which they wait is already at work among them, that the love of God in Jesus triumphs over whatever it is they fear.

Just as in the lessons for Lent, at Easter, too, John is already engaged in the conversation to which the lectionary invites the preacher and congregation. John already knows the truth of the Easter proclamation, even as he tells the story of Jesus' death. John celebrates the Easter triumph by placing the good news in the voice of the risen Jesus, and it is this voice that preacher and congregation are invited to share during the Easter season. The invitation for the preacher is to listen to that voice and to enter into it with the same confidence and assurance that fills the farewell discourse, not ignoring the realities of death but trusting in the promises of God. The Johannine Jesus voices what the church is called to voice at Easter: that our present is not shaped by the power of death, no matter how foreboding and how impending, but by the future that God in Christ has already secured. ☩

GAIL R. O'DAY is the A. H. Shatford Professor of Preaching and New Testament at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia. She is the author of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections (The New Interpreter's Bible, vol. 9).