



Keeping It Real

I have my own screen addictions, I suppose, but to admit what they are will betray my age. I never tire of watching reruns of *M*A*S*H*, and I am now reviewing the entire seven seasons of *The West Wing* (the series a Christmas gift from my wife, who saw it as the next best thing to giving me the impossible opportunity actually to vote for Josiah Bartlet in this wretched political season). How is it that in *The West Wing* the screen introduces candidates and politicians who resemble honorable, if flawed, “real” human beings while at the same time rubbing our noses in today’s candidates who purport to be real but whose screen personae are complete inventions of their marketers and handlers?

So, what is real? Most of us will probably agree that “reality TV” is not, while some will argue (even in this issue) that “virtual church” is. What, then, is required of us as preachers and teachers of the faith as we move ever deeper into the digital age? Is there a difference between my using, say, the story of Job in my Psalms course to illustrate the world of the lament psalms and my choice to use (as I will) the *West Wing* “Two Cathedrals” episode, in which President Bartlet, standing alone in the middle of Washington’s National Cathedral, curses God (in Latin!) for capriciously taking the life of his longtime secretary and friend Mrs. Landingham? Neither Job nor Bartlet are “real,” but their passion is, and their stories are telling.

But would I use the Bartlet clip in a sermon? Probably not, even though I would tell the story of Job. The former would be simply too powerful; it would overwhelm whatever text I was preaching on and relegate to the brain’s “recycle bin” any other message I tried to convey. (Others, of course, would disagree with my decision here, as I understand.)

In a recent sermon on Ps 137 (“Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!”), I invented a character, “Rivkah,” through whose experiences of suffering, starvation, cannibalism, and rape I told the story of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem and Israel’s forced march into exile. The story was effective, and people said they now understand how such terrible language could have found its way into the Psalter, but I asked myself then also whether the story worked “too well.” Did people remember my invented “Rivkah” at the expense of the broader story of the death and resurrection of Israel?

Is there a difference between drawing people into the lives of biblical characters (including the unhistorical ones) and the lives of characters of fiction and

*See “Two Cathedrals” at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Two_Cathedrals (accessed May 22, 2012).

screen? No easy answer to this question in my opinion, but raising it makes clear to me our fundamental calling to tell the truth—perhaps the only thing the church has going for it in this plastic and neon age. Part of telling the truth will be to avoid using fiction or media or even Bible “for effect”—to manipulate emotions and gain an audience.

An essential part of the church’s commitment to this real word that God has made is to take the other seriously—indeed, to love the other. Maybe that’s why I find the notion of “using” media clips and snippets troublesome. If I love the other, do I “use” the work of the other to make my own point? Preaching shouldn’t do that even with Scripture. We don’t *use* Scripture in preaching, we proclaim Scripture. If we want to honor another’s work because it moves us and draws us into conversation that deepens our humanity and relates to our understanding of the faith (as, I would argue, *West Wing*’s “Two Cathedrals” does), then we might refer to it (not “use” it) in a sermon, but even better would be to find the time to view it as a whole, on its own merits, and then enter into conversation with it that allows it to be its own thing, to be real. This “use” of the material would properly honor the vocation of the author(s), actors, and crew—it would “love” them—and allow the Spirit to work through their efforts and their artistry in whatever way the Spirit chooses (rather than in a way whose outcome the preacher has predetermined). If the work isn’t worth the time for that, it probably isn’t worth a cameo appearance in our sermon.

So, virtual world or real world? Apart from all postmodern speculation about what constitutes reality (a form of speculation we need to be prepared to enter), we do know that for the first Christians, faced with threats of various forms of docetism and Gnosticism, the “virtual” deities of the Greek myths and mysteries wouldn’t do. Nothing less than real would suffice, and for them, this meant that a particular God was in a real Christ reconciling an actual world (2 Cor 5:19). For the New Testament, being “real” involved human flesh (John 1:14; John 4:2); it required touch and sight (John 20:27; 1 John 1:1); it included eating fish (Luke 24:42–43) and washing feet (Luke 7:38); it came in bread and wine (1 Cor 11:23–26); and it surprised in words communicated face to face (Luke 24:32). We need that kind of “real” to remain the church of Jesus Christ. How we get there remains open to discussion.

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