



## *Texts in Context*

# The Bible Preaches on the Bible: Transformation in Jesus' Proclamation

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A question that is asked frequently among the participants in a Luther Seminary cohort in the Doctor of Ministry in Biblical Preaching journey is, “Why preach?” Given the content and focus of the Biblical Preaching program, the question now becomes, “Why preach biblically?” What does the Bible reveal about the teaching function of proclamation? Within the biblical narrative, for what purpose does God call people to preach? How does preaching instruct and transform in the biblical stories that we read and hear? The purpose of this article is to engage these questions by addressing the issue of what is at stake theologically in biblical preaching; we will do this by analyzing the basis of biblical preaching in Scripture itself. An exploration of biblical texts relative to Jesus’ teaching stories will illustrate this essential relationship between teaching and preaching as well as the purpose of biblical pedagogical proclamation.

A logical point of departure is the basic assertion that biblical preaching can change lives. God’s written word has the power to transform individual lives, churches, and entire communities for the good of the world by making known God’s unconditional love for all people and God’s desire for justice for all people.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ronald J. Allen, *The Teaching Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 26.

*Preachers can learn much from Jesus’ own preaching. Jesus uses everyday pictures and illustrations, employing the language of the people to proclaim the kingdom of God and to teach his hearers what it means to live in that new and surprising realm.*

The proclaimed word can do the same. It is for this purpose that God calls, commissions, and sends prophets, teachers, and preachers.

When ELCA ministers are being ordained into the ministry of word and sacrament, candidates are asked if they will preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures, the church's creeds, and the Lutheran Confessions, to which each responds, "I will, and I ask God to help me."<sup>2</sup> As Paul Scott Wilson notes in writing about Martin Luther's exposition of the priesthood of all believers, "Ministers of Word and Sacrament are not higher Christians; they are merely set apart through the rite of ordination by the community of faith to a life of study and discipline in order to exercise a ministry of the Word on behalf of the people: '...[T]he reason they are called pastors is that their duty is to find pasture for, or to teach their flock.'"<sup>3</sup> Through proclamation that contains teaching and learning moments, preachers find pasture for their listeners, leading them to the living and active God who loves, redeems, and saves.

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Biblical preaching changes lives because it, like the written word, makes God known; it makes known God's presence, power, promises, and purposes for God's people.<sup>4</sup> That being said, has the church's contemporary preaching moved away from "finding pasture for its flock" and has it wandered away from making known the God revealed in Scripture? Has our flock lost touch with the power, presence, and promises of God manifested in the biblical narrative? Biblical illiteracy in the church appears to be increasing. Perhaps one reason for this current state is that preachers have lost sight of understanding sermons as teaching and learning moments—moments in which the preacher can instruct by using the language of the people. Ronald Allen comments on a research study that analyzed the level of faith maturity in the church:

While pastors often lament the biblical illiteracy of our congregations, this study intimates a more penetrating difficulty—widespread theological illiteracy. To be sure, the church is not alone. The church's theological illiteracy is part of a growing cultural illiteracy.<sup>5</sup>

There is a need to tell the story plainly in the church today, to preach using concrete and relevant language that people can readily understand. Contributing to the mal-

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<sup>2</sup>Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Occasional Services for the Assembly* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009) 188.

<sup>3</sup>Paul Scott Wilson, "Preaching as a Theological Venture," in *Purposes of Preaching*, ed. Jana Childers (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004) 143.

<sup>4</sup>Allen, *The Teaching Sermon*, 9.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 18.

aise of confusion and misunderstanding between preacher and listener are sermons that fail to wrestle significantly with the complex issues and moral ambiguity of the daily struggles faced by a congregation. Equally confusing are sermons that speak in language that is almost completely abstract rather than specific, due in part to assumptions about the level of a congregation's biblical and theological literacy.<sup>6</sup>

These misguided assumptions are the basis for the necessity of reclaiming and renewing the teaching function in the sermon and the return to pedagogical preaching. As Allen notes, "The sermon is not the only educational mode in the church, but it can play a key role, for the hour of worship is the largest, most visible regular event in the community of faith." As such, the sermon can "set the gospel resonating in the consciousness of the community."<sup>7</sup>

Preaching changes lives—this proposition is recorded and affirmed in Scripture. Yet, because listeners have become increasingly unfamiliar with Scripture and, as a result, with the God revealed in Scripture, more biblical teaching is necessary in sermons to explain, clarify, and illumine—and as a result to help parishioners encounter the God who changes individual lives and entire communities. While hardly exhaustive, the following biblical texts, whose context is teaching and preaching in Jesus' ministry, are chosen to show how teaching functions in his proclamation. In these texts, the preacher can be drawn into the realm of how the Bible preaches on the Bible, as Jesus helps his listeners and followers find new meaning for their context through interpreting, explaining, clarifying, and illumining the power of God's word. In so doing, Jesus' preaching is transformative for listeners then and now, as is seen in the different contexts and styles of parables, storytelling, and the Sermon on the Mount.

## JESUS AND THE REIGN OF GOD

The Gospels record Jesus proclaiming the nearness of God's reign with power and authority in word and deed. Jesus' disciples and followers, including pastors and preachers of every time and place, are called and sent to do the very same. In the commissioning and sending of the apostles, Jesus connects the task of preaching to the ministries of teaching and healing: "And he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal" (Luke 9:2); more, "Whoever listens to you listens to me" (Luke 10:16). Jesus' life-changing goal is that everyone hear and know that God's reign has begun on earth. He authorizes and empowers his disciples to preach and teach: "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15).<sup>8</sup> This section will explore how Jesus teaches in his preaching through the use of parables, and how he preaches pedagogically—both prophetically and pastorally—in the Sermon on the Mount.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 10–11.

<sup>8</sup>See Wilson, "Preaching as a Theological Venture," 142–143.

### *Parables*

In his preaching and teaching about the reign of God, Jesus frequently uses parables. But the word “parable” defies easy explanation, much like the literary and rhetorical stories the term represents. For the purposes of this review, I will use C. H. Dodd’s traditional definition of parable: “At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”<sup>9</sup>

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Through vivid and surprising pictorial stories, Jesus proclaims the reign of God. His use of earthy and evocative language by means of allegory, simile, and metaphor generates active participation in the preaching event on the part of his listeners. Jesus uses powerful, recognizable, concrete, and relevant examples and illustrations in his picture stories that help his listeners see and understand in a new way the things pertaining to God and God’s reign. It is notable that he uses the language of the people and not abstract theological terms or complex religious jargon. In his pedagogical preaching, the stories Jesus employs draw from the everyday experiences of his listeners. The use of examples and illustrations such as fathers and sons, bridesmaids and bridegrooms, seeds and trees, shepherds and sheep help connect the realm of God to the everyday experiences of daily life.<sup>10</sup> The following two short parables from Luke show how this connection can happen:

He said therefore, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.” And again he said, “To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.” (Luke 13:18–21)

Listener and readers are drawn into a story that questions, searches for, and arrives at an answer. Jesus likens the reign of God to things of the earth that begin seemingly small and insignificant, yet blossom into something large and pervasive.<sup>11</sup>

Some argue that Jesus’ parables are teaching stories that use masterful sermon illustrations to make difficult theological ideas clear and easy to understand.

<sup>9</sup>C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Fontana, 1961) 16; cited by Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 92.

<sup>10</sup>Robert T. Newbold, “Pictorial Preaching in the Bible,” *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 9/2 (Spring 1982) 137.

<sup>11</sup>Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms*, 99.

Seen in this light, Jesus is a skillful teacher who used parables to make his instruction clear, forceful, and memorable for his listeners. Others argue that Jesus' parables are not intended to make things clearer or easier to understand, but more difficult. Seen in this light, parables contain hidden meanings and truths that listeners must draw out to gain understanding and clarity.<sup>12</sup>

Given the difficulty in defining a parable and the differing opinions of a parable's function, some common ground can be reached when one understands Jesus' parables to be stories that teach about the surprising nature of God's kingdom and an entirely new realm. David Lose notes,

An entirely new reality, of course, is difficult to conceptualize. I think that is probably why Jesus gives greatest expression to what the realm of God will be like through parables. Parables do not pretend to correspond to reality directly. They are regularly outrageous, exaggerated, humorous, and almost always have a hidden trap door that only drops open a little while after the telling. Parables, that is, get at reality sideways, disrupting our sensibilities and overturning our conventions in order to point to how it will be in the new realm and reign of God.<sup>13</sup>

The teaching function of the parable is to open listeners to a new and unexpected world of action.<sup>14</sup> Through exploring, questioning, and wrestling with matters of meaning and interpretation, the hearers that Jesus addresses are not merely passive recipients of information and knowledge. They are actively engaged in the thought process and are drawn into the preaching conversation and thus into the nearness of God's reign. Experiencing the nearness of God's realm, Jesus' audience encounters the surprising and expansive nature of God's love, mercy, and grace.

### *The Sermon on the Mount*

The Sermon on the Mount proclaims and teaches what life is like in the reign of God. The Sermon is a series of ethical speeches that both reinterpret the existing law and offer a new one.<sup>15</sup> Jesus believes, teaches, and preaches that the reign of God has broken into time. Jesus' life, ministry, mission, imminent death, resurrection, and ascension are evidence of this reality. The content of the Sermon on the Mount addresses this present truth while at the same time giving voice to the future-oriented eschatological nature of God's reign, to be fully completed at the time of Christ's return when God will make all things new. The challenge of the Sermon is to proclaim and inform these two distinct dimensions: life in the present and eternal life in the future.

Jesus responds to the challenge by giving his diverse audience pictures, stories, and illustrations to help his listeners see and understand the radical nature of

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 88.

<sup>13</sup>David J. Lose, "Christ the King," November 14, 2010, in WorkingPreacher.org, at [http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear\\_wp.aspx?article\\_id=425](http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=425) (accessed May 22, 2012).

<sup>14</sup>Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms*, 105.

<sup>15</sup>Dennis C. Duling, Notes to Matthew in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, rev. ed., ed. Wayne A. Meeks (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006) 1674.

this new reign. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is seated "on the Mount," a position of pedagogical authority as well as a biblical location where divine things happen. For Matthew, the mountain is often the place where God's revelation happens.<sup>16</sup> On this holy place, Jesus draws into the conversation the gathered crowd below him, including the religious, the disciple, and the seeker alike.

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The Sermon opens with a series of beatitudes, or blessings, that describe the surprising requirements for inclusion in God's reign. Those who are welcome and included in this new radical reorientation are the poor, the grieving, the meek, the merciful, the pure, the hungry, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. The blessings bear witness to Jesus who is sent to bring good news to the poor and proclaim deliverance to the captive. They also give identity to the people of God's reign: the "light of the world" and "salt of the earth," who, in the words of Robert Guelich, "stand before God empty-handed, vulnerable, seeking a right relationship with God and others, open to receive and express God's mercy and forgiveness with integrity, ready to experience and to establish peace."<sup>17</sup> Blessed by God, the people living in God's reign are to be blessings for others by bringing God's love and light into the world around them.

The Beatitudes are followed by a series of ethical demands and expectations utilizing evocative word pictures. In this part of the Sermon, Jesus' demands function as instructions for moral conduct as people live in God's reign. The demands focus on righteousness, or how we live in right relationship with God and with our neighbor. As Matthew Skinner notes,

The Sermon describes "righteousness" mostly in moral terms. Still, righteousness that is part and parcel of the kingdom of heaven is not merely a list of actions to be performed. Although Jesus insists that certain behaviors are utterly vital for a life of faith, his greater point is that righteousness encompasses the focus and state of mind that motivates and sustains one's actions.<sup>18</sup>

The demands, then, are not something one must do in order to earn God's favor. That gift has already been given, as the Beatitudes make clear. Rather, Jesus' expectations define the ethics of God's reign in terms of trusting in God and God's promises and then responding to God's faithfulness by living out one's trust in thankfulness and love.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 1673.

<sup>17</sup>Robert A. Guelich, "Sermon on the Mount," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 688.

<sup>18</sup>Matthew L. Skinner, "Commentary on Matthew 6: 1–6, 16–21," February 25, 2009, in WorkingPreacher.org, at [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect\\_date=2/25/2009&tab=4&alt=1](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=2/25/2009&tab=4&alt=1) (accessed May 22, 2012).

The sermon concludes with a series of warnings and exhortations that use illustrations, stories, and parables to instruct, inform, and drive home Jesus' point. The Gospel writer concludes his recording of the Sermon on the Mount with the following commentary, noting the effectiveness and life-changing impact of Jesus' pedagogical preaching, "Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matt 7:28–29).

#### PREACHING INSTRUCTS AND INFORMS

The goal of surveying this series of texts is to illustrate how preaching instructs and transforms within biblical texts that are themselves preaching stories and to show how the Bible can preach on the Bible. Through interpreting and imagining biblical texts in a new way, listeners are drawn into the preaching conversation as they think about and imagine God's reign as a present reality in their current life situations. Lives are changed in the biblical texts as a result of effective pedagogical preaching. Through teaching that utilizes biblical exposition, narrative and storytelling, prophetic warning and enlivening promise, vivid imagery and picture language, confusion yields to clarity, meaning is given, and hope is proclaimed as the nearness of God's reign becomes real in the lives of God's people.

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Those called and sent to teach and preach today can bring clarity, give meaning, and proclaim hope by following the example Jesus sets in his biblical pedagogical preaching in the texts referenced above. Preaching that informs and awakens by using creative and relevant illustrations and examples can help our listeners see and understand in a new way the love and grace that is characteristic of God's reign.

Does our biblical preaching have the authority to help connect our listeners anew to the power of God at work for good in the world today? Following Jesus' model, can we likewise astound our crowds, however large or small, with preaching that channels God's transformational life-giving power? Can our preaching illumine, enlighten, and inspire so that our listeners are drawn deeply into the preaching conversation so that we experience anew God's power and trust again in God's promises? We claim that God's word can do just that. Thus, by God's grace, individual lives, churches, and entire communities can be changed by the transformative power of God's love and mercy made known in the proclaimed word.

For those who have forgotten the story of God's love, mercy, and grace, preaching functions as a timely reminder, along with exhortation and encouragement to remember. For those who do not know the story, preaching makes God known through teaching by means of concrete explanation, inspiring narrative, evocative imagery, creative storytelling, and dramatic pictorial language. For those who are skeptical and do not believe the story, preaching offers another way of imagining and picturing things by engaging and drawing the listener into the preaching conversation. It is in that dialogue—in the exposition and clarification and in the questioning and wrestling with issues of faith—that God is made known and listeners are drawn near to the God who redeems, saves, and changes lives.

Preaching transforms lives in the Bible. Preaching today that teaches and proclaims the gospel in such a way that it is heard and understood can similarly change lives. It can provide a way by which pastors can actively address the biblical illiteracy present in contemporary culture and in the church today. ☩

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