



Whose Imagination?

I am a regular “reader” of audio books, listening to them almost daily as I walk. But twice recently I have given up on a book, not so much because of the content, in which I was actually interested, but because of the reader. If you use this format, you will have noticed that they are no longer “read by N.N.” but rather “performed by N.N.” And therein lies the problem. If the “performer” calls too much attention to his or her dramatic performance, the book itself recedes into the background. Still, I have no doubt that other audio “readers” of the same novel find the treatment of the performer enhancing. There’s our dilemma: a performance that troubles one person might attract another.

What has this to do with “biblical imagination”? Often these days, a preacher or other public reader of scripture, imaginatively “performs” the reading, and, for me, with the same results—sometimes enhancing my experience, sometimes dramatically or clumsily getting in the way.

So, what to do? There is, of course, no reading, no translation, no proclamation that is not in some way a performance. There can be bad performances or good ones, but every reading is a performance, including the sonorous and more “objective” readers in a British lessons and carols service. Having said that, however, it is clear that some readings are more deliberately performances than others. Often, when a preacher “performs” the text and then moves to “preach” on it, I respond (to myself), “But you just did!” That interpretive dramatic reading was itself a sermon on the text—again, sometimes a good one, sometimes not so good.

Personally (and with apologies to my friends who “perform” texts quite well), I want to err on the side of letting the text be the text and the sermon be the sermon, if, for no other reason, than the possibility that an imaginative “performance” of a text might rob hearers of their own imaginative participation. The lector has already done our work for us.

But then, having said that, I think the sermon can and should be as imaginative as possible. Here, I disagree with Bonhoeffer, who thought the best form of preaching was what he called the “homily”—which for him meant reading a few verses, then commenting on them, and proceeding in like manner throughout the text. This would be, he thought, the best and most faithful “biblical” preaching.* Sometimes today, so-called “narrative” preachers want to do something similar. This certainly has its place—perhaps especially when we can no longer assume that

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics*, ed. and trans. with critical commentary by Clyde E. Fant, rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1991)129.

the hearer has any idea whatsoever what a biblical text is actually about. The danger, however, is that preaching and teaching can become indistinguishable, so Christ is not so much proclaimed as explained.

Preaching, I think, needs to be more “imaginative”—granting that dangers lie there as well. What about, for example, a sermon that “invents” a character that could have been in the text but wasn’t—say, an individual participant in the forced-march exile from Jerusalem? How might her story allow us to hear the text and its meaning in a new way? Or what about inventing a dialogue between the preacher and the text, treating the text or its author as a partner in a contemporary conversation that raises questions quite unknown to the text in its own day or imaginative responses from the text quite surprising to the congregant in our own day. I have done both things, and both received positive response. Still, when people began openly to weep as I told that first-person “story” of an invented participant in the exile, forced to witness the starvation deaths of her children and her own gang rape, I got nervous. My point was to explain how anyone could be brought to the dreadful last lines of Ps 137 (my text)—“O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” My exercise seemed to work, but did it work too well? Was there too much imagined past emotion and too much produced present emotion? I thought not at the time—the text is deeply emotional, after all—but the danger became clear to me. Where is the boundary line between imagining a text and proclaiming a text? What will be the controls?

The primary control, of course, is the text itself. What we are reading, interpreting, performing, imagining is the biblical text. Without that, there is no sermon, no reason for the interpretive or imaginative moment to exist. There are many stories that can move people (or manipulate them!), but our source is the biblical text. If one cannot imagine this interpretation of the text, one might better leave it alone.

Another control is the Christian community, past and present. Granted, the form of our discourse might serve as a surprise to colleagues and congregants of the present and even more so to the saints of the past, but can they recognize in it the saving and healing word of God? If not, we are in some trouble.

Another way to say this is to ask whether, in our preaching, people meet Christ, whether people are set free. Jesus himself is our teacher at this point. In his first sermon, he announced the purpose of the word of God, and his own purpose as well: “to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19). If our proclamation is not doing that, it is not word of God, not Bible at all, and no amount of imagination will help.

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