

The Message Is from God

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I never settled on an opening line for this presentation, so I'll simply tell you that it's a humbling thing to stand here today charged with giving the keynote address for a gathering of the Institute for Liturgical Studies. I have attended this conference for many years—not for as long as many of you, but in twenty-six years at Valparaiso University I recall only one institute I missed completely. That means I've heard at least a hundred institute talks from this podium, and the excellence of the speakers here has consistently enriched and encouraged, sometimes entertained, and often awed me. Thus, it's an honor, a weighty matter, to be here.

And I'm asked to talk about preaching, no less—one of the two or three things I care most about, after my family and close friends. David Truemper extended the invitation to do this presentation nearly a year ago. With that kind of lead time, I thought for certain I could do justice to the assignment. I would travel around some and listen to many different preachers, and then I would perform the duties of a keynote speaker by opening up the topic of Christian proclamation through an exhaustive report and analysis—or perhaps diagnosis and prognosis—of the current state of preaching in the church.

Exactly one year ago this week, however, I agreed to serve as a vacancy pastor for a small congregation not far from here. Less than forty-eight hours ago we installed the new pastor of that congregation, which means I have not heard many other preachers in the past year. I have mostly heard myself, for better or for worse. So I cannot tell you from firsthand experience about the current state of preaching in the church.

But I can tell you some other things about the state of the church that I couldn't have known firsthand without the last year's experience. For one thing, I have not lately been part of a liturgical context or culture such as we share in the worship associated with this conference, which means that most likely it has not been much like the liturgical practice you keep alive in your congregations.

Like nearly all the smaller Missouri Synod congregations around here, the service book and hymnal in the pews is *The Lutheran Hymnal (TLH)*. At the early service, attended primarily by the long-time members of the

congregation, we “do” page 5 and 15 on alternating Sundays.¹ (I say “we” because in my heart I’ve still not let go of this group.) Newer members of the congregation, for the most part, attend a later service at which we don’t use *TLH*, or any other book for that matter, but a complete order printed for each Sunday. Still, however, the songs and order of service are quite traditional.

We have no choir, but occasionally there are “special” elements to the worship. Most of these are gifts of the congregation’s chairman. He’s a good man—a heating and air-conditioning technician by trade, but also a musician and entertainer on weekends. He plays saxophone well enough to be in the Valparaiso University community band, and he also sings, accompanied by a karaoke system, at wedding receptions and other “gigs,” as he calls them. Actually, he imitates Elwood Blues, of *Blues Brothers* movie fame, which means his act is to imitate what is already a slightly satirical imitation of Elvis Presley imitators.

Sometimes he brings his saxophone to church, and sometimes he brings his karaoke system. On July fourth, for example, he brought his karaoke setup, and for the pre-service music he sang a medley of patriotic songs. On Mother’s Day last year, my first Sunday on duty in the just-ended pastoral vacancy, he opened both the *TLH* service and the later service with a Doo-Wop style karaoke rendition of “How Great Thou Art.” Between the first and second lessons, he did a similar setting of “I Believe for Every Drop of Rain that Falls, a Flower Grows.” The lector who came forward that day to read the second lesson is the former chairman of the congregation, a highly educated man and a lifelong Lutheran. Before he read from the third chapter of 1 Peter, he looked out over the congregation and said with a straight face, “Elvis has left the building.” I wondered if perhaps he, too, was thinking about that old Garrison Keillor monologue in which something similar happened at Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church, and Pastor Inqvist had to sit, just as I did, in a clergy chair in front of the whole congregation, trying to keep a straight face and imagining ways to explain to folks that “I Believe for Every Drop of Rain that Falls, a Flower Grows” is not quite an epitome of Lutheran theology. After the service, in my hearing, many members of the congregation warmly thanked and complimented the congregational chairman for his musical offering and suggested he do it more often. I bit my lip.

¹Editor’s note: “Page 5” and “page 15” refer to the primary Sunday liturgies in *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941). “The Order of Morning Service Without Communion” begins on page 5; “The Order of Holy Communion” begins on page 15.

But I must tell you, my friends and colleagues, there are two ways to tell that story. There is another way to tell it, or another layer to what I've told you so far that makes all the difference. Mother's Day last year was the first Sunday after a long, difficult, and very painful period in the life of that congregation which had ultimately resulted in the resignation of the pastor. Among the complexities of this difficulty was a strained relationship with the district and its officers, some of whom blamed the congregation's leaders for "the mess."

On the Friday evening before Mother's Day, which also happened to be the Sixth Sunday of Easter, the district president called the chairman of the congregation at his home and urged him to do something that would make the congregation's worship special that Sunday. So here was a Christian layman, a man who knows heating and air-conditioning systems in large buildings like you and I know the scriptures and the liturgy of the church, and who was also wounded, angry, and nearly alienated from the church by what had been going on, faced with a request from a district president who had recently scolded him as though he were a child, to "do something special."

He did what he knew. He brought his gift. He hauled his wounded heart and his karaoke machine to church and he sang, "How Great Thou Art." And those people in the narthex afterwards who thanked him for his music hadn't heard precisely the same thing I had. They heard the praise of God from one of their number, which was for them a sign that despite all they had come through in recent months, they were still the church, still the body of Christ, still God's people, still able to rejoice in the presence of God and one another.

The Wounded Offering Up the Gift of Words

So, dear friends, I can't tell you about the state of preaching in the church. I can only talk about coming to the assembly of God's people loaded up with all our words and all our thoughts and all our many blessings, but also with all our many wounds, and doing, saying, playing, and offering up our gifts. And for some of us, our gifts are words. We are the proclaimers.

Of all the weeks in the church year, perhaps in this one it's easy to remember this simple truth about the wounds that are always present as the barely-out-of-sight layer in the stories of our assemblies, preachments, and music. Since this annual institute was chased by the winter weather of pre-Lent to these sometimes balmy days post-Easter, we always gather when

the gospel lesson for the week is John 20:19-31, in which the wounds of Jesus become for Thomas the sign that this One is, indeed, his Lord and God. And no other could be. Even risen from the dead—and in John’s gospel ascended as well!—Christ still has, as Frederick Buechner has called them, “those ruined hands.”²

Those ruined hands remain today a sign for us, too, that we never, ever get very far from the cross and its centrality in our lives, our theologies, and our vocations. That does not go without saying nowadays, at least the way I read the religious climate of our times. I personally don’t believe all the pundits, mostly on the right of all the spectrums one could analyze, who say we’re a thoroughly secular, godless society. We in the United States today are as religious a people as have ever walked the earth, I suspect. We nearly rival the ancient Hellenic civilization in which critics could get a death penalty conviction against a teacher like Socrates for “dissing” the gods and corrupting the youth, or others like Paul could start riots if folks thought someone was threatening loyalty to Artemis of the Ephesians. Our politicians kowtow to religious voting blocks. The local papers in these parts arrive every day with letters to the editor about obedience to the ten commandments and justification by grace. This brand of justification by grace isn’t something in which people live so much as it’s a slogan for beating up on others. Moralism is rampant in this culture, and also in the church.

Even the thoughtful and non-extremist, it seems to me, prove Douglas John Hall right when he declares *theologia crucis* a thin tradition and rare thing among Christians nowadays. I could cite a hundred examples and so could you. Among them is a marvelously gifted, Christian drama troupe called “Friends of the Groom” that visited this campus a few weeks ago to do workshops with our theater students and with Soul Purpose, our own liturgical drama group. Their performances were truly excellent—clever, thoughtful, and technically superb. Their theology and their message basically made the points I perceive as the popular or cultural theology of our age: Miracles are possible. We don’t really need the church, but we probably ought to go there more often. We really can do better than we’re doing now. And death doesn’t get the last word—not so much because of resurrection but because death isn’t real in the first place. An amazing amount of preaching follows this same theology.

I could also cite a small group of fourth-year seminarians at a seminary not far from here with whom I worked on homiletics for part of

²Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 166.

an academic quarter a few years ago. Each of them produced a sermon as part of the course segment I led, and not one of those sermons even mentioned, much less made use of, the crucified Christ. When I questioned this, they seemed genuinely puzzled that this seemed so important to me. They explained their assumption that people didn't want to hear about Jesus or the cross all the time. Dwelling on those merely turns folks off.

Perhaps it has always been thus. The cross is forgotten, and the wounds ignored. I invite you during our worship in these days to examine closely, as you have opportunity, the Christ figure who dominates the chancel of Valparaiso University's Chapel of the Resurrection. My friend and colleague David Kehret, one of our university pastors, only recently pointed out to us here that our ascending, heaven-bound *Christus Rex* is a fraud. He has no wounds on his hands or feet, and we must wonder about his side, which remains hidden under those golden, liturgical garments he's wearing. Perhaps he is the Transfigured Christ, pre-Calvary, but he cannot be the risen Christ who came to that locked room and invited Thomas to touch him and to be held in his ruined hands.

We're going to keep that Christ up there in our chancel anyway, in case you're interested. Another colleague, John Steven Paul of our Theatre and Television Arts Department, quickly pointed out that though our chancel icon has no wounds, it's made of metal that's been hammered into that *Christus Rex* depiction. This Christ the King has been beaten into the form of royalty, exalted always and forever cross-high.

We have another rationale for keeping it despite its want of wounds. It falls to the members of the body of Christ who worship in that place to embody the wounds that the Risen One still has and to show those wounds to Thomas and to all his many twins when they come there broken in heart and in spirit. And when we go there ourselves as worshipers and listeners, we go there saying, "Unless I, too, can put my hand into the nail-prints and touch that gaping side, I cannot give my heart away once more in the risk of believing."

"In many and various ways God spoke to his people of old by the prophets, but now, in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb 1:1). In these days beyond the last days, however, God speaks once more in many and various ways—through us. Still by his Son, all right, but through us.

The task of being the preacher over and over again is surely among the most fearsome challenges that those who follow a calling into the ministry of word and sacrament face. Oh, the seminary can train us in a method for studying texts and finding something to say and can even assist us in

having the courage to speak. My own training included some marvelous teachers, about whom I will say more later, and some sound methods. I learned, as did at least some of you, Richard Caemmerer's "Goal, Malady, Means," as well as George Hoyer's take on them, "Point, Problem, and Power." From Robert Bertram's way of doing systematics and Bible at the same time, I learned prognosis and diagnosis, and the remarkably crucial element of seeking out and tapping the power in a biblical text's prevailing metaphor.

But no seminary can prepare us for the circumstances in which we must preach. Only life and ministry, and perhaps God, pounding on us day after day and night after night, can do that. I think, for example, of my own first occasion to preach a real sermon, the one that came as part of the first-year homiletics course at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. The preaching date was April 5, 1968—a Friday morning class period with a 7:45 a.m. starting time, as I recall. As usual, four of us would preach to a congregation of our classmates and a video camera in a mock sanctuary. My assigned text was the Reformation gospel lesson from John 8: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free," it said in part. I had memorized my sermon, as we were required to preach without notes of any kind. I had it down cold.

But on the evening of April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., fell victim to an assassin's bullet and to all the poisons in the culture that were riding on that bullet as it tore him open and spilled out his life onto that motel balcony in Memphis. All that night the sky over north St. Louis glowed orange. The radio and television voices said everything was under control. We knew differently. And in the morning I spoke words about freedom quite different from the ones I'd memorized the evening before.

A year and a half later, on the evening before my first Sunday sermon as a vicar at Trinity Lutheran Church in Memphis, Tennessee, I went to the church alone, turned on just enough lights, and stepped into the pulpit to practice my sermon. There I found an aged, yellowed strip of paper taped to the surface above where I would lay my notes. It said, "Sir, we would see Jesus." Obviously, this request of some Gentiles to the disciple Philip in John 12 had been posted there for a long time in order to remind me or any other preacher in that pulpit that the people here gathered needed to behold Jesus, to be in his presence somehow, as a consequence of preaching. That was my calling. I took it seriously.

Once more I stayed up half the night memorizing my sermon, this time on Luke's story about Jesus raising the widow's son at Nain. When I did lie down to rest, I did not slip easily into sleep. However, when I finally

awakened, both the alarm and the phone were ringing. It was five minutes until the early service would begin, and I lived about that many minutes from the church. I made it, without shaving or showering, and appearing *deus ex machina* in the pulpit during the sermon hymn. (Thank goodness for the old *TLH* order of things!) But the congregants did not see Jesus, I fear. No, they saw a shaken, unkempt young fellow who looked pretty much like that startled, bewildered young man of Nain, newly snatched from a deep, deep sleep.

Since then I've preached hundreds of sermons in scores of places, but I try to remember always that wherever and whenever I do so, the sky glows orange with the world's hot anguish, and as for me, I'm no more, but no less, than a young man plucked from the jaws of death by another young man who'd already then set his face toward Jerusalem, and he says to me, "Your mother needs you."

Images of the Preacher: Who Are We When We Preach?

Who are we, really, when we preach? And how shall we name what we're doing? I've been saving quotes about such things for years, and more lately asking my friends.

A preacher is a Christian who briefly takes on a special stature for a portion of a worship service, and burns like the filament in a light bulb with the current that runs through the whole congregation. (My friend and colleague Walt Wangerin said that one day.)

The overwhelming majority of preachers are good and devout persons who have nothing to say and must say it every Sunday. (*Valparaiso Vidette-Messenger* clipping, 1993)

Sometimes I get a good idea and preach a sermon that really communicates. More often I strain and struggle and come up with nothing worth preaching. On those days I must still preach, but I do so with the knowledge that those people out there who listen really do love me, and they will love me anyway, despite the sermon. (Ken Mangelsdorf, pastor of St. Peter, Mishawaka, Indiana, and one of my role models)

There is no special honor in being called to the preaching ministry. There is only special pain. The pulpit calls those anointed to it as the sea calls its sailors, and, like the sea, it batters and bruises, and does not rest. To preach, to really preach, is to die naked a little at a time, and to know each time you do it that you must do it again. (Bruce W. Thielemann, quoted in *Chicago Tribune*, 1982)

That last one I have used before at the Institute of Liturgical Studies, in one of those times I've done text studies. I have also named you preachers and described your work in the few sermons I've done as part of the institute's Eucharist. In those I've likened you to the woman who comes to the well in John 4, five times married and looking for something to fill her bucket for one more day, only to meet the One whose words send her running home with the message, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!"

Once I even likened you to potty-mouth Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*, who finally gives up the impossible task of protecting his ten-year-old sister by washing away every graffiti appearance of that lousy F-word and decides instead to stick close to his sister, so at least he's with her if and when the F-word hurts her.

I've decided to do some more of that today, saying who you are—who we are—when we proclaim the gospel in homilies and sermons. Part of the reason comes from an important lesson I once learned through the weakness of personal vanity. Back in the mid-1980s, James Cox, a professor of preaching at the Southern Baptist seminary in Louisville, started something called the "Best Sermons Competition," which would result in publication of a collection of sermons by the contest "winners." I read about this and mailed in a reply card to get information on how to enter the competition. One part of the contest directions stymied me completely. Sermons had to be submitted in categories, as follows: Evangelistic, Expository, Doctrinal, Ethical, Pastoral, or Devotional. I had a couple sermons in mind from my files that I thought I'd submit, but when I asked myself, "Are they evangelistic, expository, doctrinal, ethical, pastoral, or devotional?" I could only answer, "Yes."

I could see I'd get nowhere in the contest, but when *Best Sermons 1*³ eventually appeared with the award-winners in 1988, I bought a copy and read most of the collection. Many of the sermons are prophetic, and some of them actually proclaim the gospel. But only a tiny handful give any hint of being part of a liturgical event or having some connection to a liturgical calendar. That means, I believe, that we who do most of our proclamation in the context of sacramental worship in a catechizing, baptizing, absolving, eucharistic community, really do something different than what happens in other, mostly Protestant contexts. We assume amongst

³James William Cox and Kenneth M. Cox, *Best Sermons 1* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

ourselves—both between each other and between ourselves and God—an eternal bond and unity in baptism. We confess and absolve, and we set the table. Sometimes we carefully examine the wounds in our hands before we use them for passing the peace or lifting them up in prayer. We throw up our lives as a heave offering, just as the offertory procession forms, and all we are and have goes forward to the table.

I tell my few students in our basic homily class here at Valparaiso that in liturgical contexts such as these, where we rely so heavily on our baptism and receive our nurture through absolution and the Eucharist, the gospel isn't so much a third-person treatise about the abstract possibilities of miracles, or living our lives better, or even the forgiveness of sins. Gospel syntax in the eucharistic assembly is mostly first- and second-person discourse. The voice from the heavens forms it: "You are my son, in whom I am well pleased. You are my daughter, my beloved, the delight of my soul." We hear other voices, too: "I forgive you all your sins." And, "Take and eat, this is my body, given for you." When you preach, that voice possesses you and lights you up like the filament in a light bulb.

Here's another image I've used on you previously. Back in 1984 I found you proclaimers in the story of a young, Dutch, Jewish woman named Etty Hillesum, who spent the last two years of her life, 1942 and 1943, first at Westerbork, a Nazi transit camp in the Netherlands, and finally in Auschwitz. Though she did not survive the *Shoah*, her memoirs somehow did, and they were published under the title *An Interrupted Life*.⁴ They tell of a young woman's struggle to cope with life and love and sex and parents, and ultimately with the horrors of the story that goes by the name "Holocaust." In the face of radical evil Etty Hillesum clung to her faith, to her spirit, to her heart, to her God. Late one night, near the end of her days in the transit camp, she wrote:

I shall no longer write in this exercise book, I shall simply lie down and try to be a prayer.... I know perfectly well I am not much good to anyone as I am now. I would so love to be just a little bit better again. But I ought not to make any demands. I must let things take their course and that's what I am trying to do with all my might. 'Not my will, but Thy will be done.'

There is no hidden poet in me, just a little piece of God that might grow into poetry.

And a camp needs a poet, one who experiences life there, even there, as a bard and is able to sing about it.

⁴Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943*, trans. Arnold Pomerans (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

At night, as I lay in the camp on my plank bed, surrounded by women and girls gently snoring, dreaming aloud, quietly sobbing and turning, women and girls who often told me during the day, 'We don't want to think, we don't want to feel, otherwise we are sure to go out of our minds,' I was sometimes filled with an infinite tenderness, and lay awake for hours letting all the many, too many impressions of a much too long day wash over me, and I prayed, 'Let me be the thinking heart of these barracks,' And that is what I want to be again. The thinking heart of a whole concentration camp. I lie here so patiently and now so calmly again, that I feel quite a bit better already.⁵

That's what a preacher is: A camp poet; a thinking heart, lying awake, filled with an infinite tenderness; one in whom there is a piece of something that clings to God even there, something that might grow into poetry. Out of that tenderness grows a poem that becomes a story which will connect all the other fragments of story to the one in which the cross stands in the middle, and thus transform all of the stories of heartache and death into the story that leads first to hell but then ends in doxology. That is, the preacher must fashion the poem which is the word of God.

Images of Preaching: How Shall We Name What We're Doing?

We might stay in prison for a while longer and see ourselves like Paul, writing from a jail cell to his friends back in Philippi, and telling them to rejoice in the Lord always; to think on whatever was true, pure, honorable, just, and worthy of praise; and to keep on doing what they have learned (Phil 4:4-9). Just last week one of my colleagues here, Richard Lee, reminded us in morning prayer to remember the wisdom of that order of things: REJOICE—THINK—DO. His homily made me think of my heating and air-conditioning friend who somehow knew to rejoice first. The thinking and doing could, and would, follow.

A preacher, too, is one who has been in prison and somehow lived to tell about it, or at least can write letters from prison to the ones still running around in some measure of freedom. That is, a preacher is one who follows Jesus into all the places Jesus talks about in that Easter season gospel lesson we get to use every third year, the one in John 14, where Jesus says during that last supper with his friends,

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also (John 14:2).

⁵Ibid., 190–191.

We're quick to think of some place beyond the resurrection—heaven perhaps—when we hear these words. But Jesus had other places to go before he ever got to such a place, and John's gospel takes pains to name them carefully. Jesus went ahead to prepare those other places, too, knowing full well we'd end up in them also. The first place he went after supper was the place Judas also knew, a place in a garden, the place of treachery. Jesus prepared that place where sooner or later each of us would find ourselves. Next was the place called "the place of a skull," Golgatha. He prepared it as well, for each of us will arrive there one day also. And then the place where they laid Jesus, dead. That, too, will be our place. That he went ahead of us to prepare those places means there is no place, no space, no time, no condition in which any one of us might ever find ourselves but that even there he is Lord for us, is there with us, and has prepared that place for our arrival.

A preacher has followed along and been to those same places, and the marks of having been there remain on her heart. They still might stain his vestments. In the past couple weeks several hundred of us here at Valparaiso have read together a story about the places a priest or pastor can go. In Shusaku Endo's novel *Silence* we read the story of a young, seventeenth-century, Portuguese seminary graduate, Sebastian Rodrigues, sent to Japan to be a missionary.⁶ He dreamed of bringing Jesus and the gospel to that place, but the gospel had already come to Japan, and by the time Rodrigues arrived, vicious persecution had come down on believers there. Indeed, one of Rodrigues' goals was to find his old teacher who had come to Japan before him and vanished, and there were rumors he had apostatized.

Soon, Rodrigues found himself in a series of places he could scarcely have imagined back in seminary. He faced an excruciating dilemma. His presence only made for more suffering and persecution for those who'd already confessed Christ before he'd arrived in Japan. Thus, Rodrigues' life became a sequence of hiding places, strange exiles, scenes of treachery, and finally a series of prisons.

Near the end, on the night before he would be asked either to renounce his faith so that other believers held captive might live, or to confess his faith and then watch all the others die, he waited in a tiny, pitch-dark, cold, wet cell that reeked of urine and feces. Trapped in his misery, with all those other lives hanging by the thread of the choice he had to make, he

⁶Shusaku Endo, *Silence*, trans. William Johnston (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1979).

thought himself alone in this awful place. The cell was small enough so that he could feel all four walls at once without moving. His hands moved about on those walls in the dark. Eventually his fingers found grooves dug into one of the walls. He put his fingers into the marks. They were letters. He traced them with his finger tips. The letters spelled LAUDATE EUM—"Praise him!" A fragment of a psalm verse scratched into the wall meant even in this godforsaken place, Rodrigues was not alone. Someone had gone before, perhaps facing the same terrible choice, and that one had prepared even this place for him.

When you preach, if you have yourself been to some such prison, perhaps less foul but maybe worse, you can stand before God's people and tell them the truth. And the truth you know from your own life is this: Even should you be swallowed by a great sea monster and carried down deep as Sheol, near the boundaries of space and time where day and night are the same, if you reach out in the darkness and touch the walls you will find even there the scratching of some crazy poet's notes—the first draft, perhaps, of the song that Jonah wrote there. "Praise him!" it begins.

And know this, too, as you seek to be a faithful preacher, that in whatever place you find yourself in the days and years ahead, every such place has been prepared for you. He will have been there ahead of you. He will be there with you. He will welcome you in the person of one who has sunk so low as you have, into shame, into despair, into alcohol, into confusion, blindness, loneliness, or the weakness of aging. Remember as well that he will be there, too, in one who has need of whatever gift you still have to give away—someone who needs the single shred of faith to which you cling, your last ounce of strength or courage, or the last hymn verse that still comes to your lips.

To preach Christ is to make a place for those with no place, as that is what Jesus' name means. *Yeshua*, from the verb *ישע*, is the Hebrew word for "salvation" and God's saving activity. The verb has the root meaning "to make room, or give space." For a nomadic people few things were more important than to have a place, however temporary. The question of place and location became much more complex for Israel as they consecrated a holy place as God's own. They centered their life around that place, but then they lost that place. The ancient exiles of Israel then asked, "Where is God now?"

As the Bible tells the story of humankind, this question brings things full circle, for the first question God asks in the Bible is a question of place: "Where are you?" God calls into the bushes of Eden. Someone's always lost in this story, so it's no surprise that the most common word for

God's saving action is one that sets things in place, that locates God and humankind in proper proximity.

We proclaim the same salvation in an age that knows dislocation as well as any before it. The echo of Elie Wiesel's question in his little volume *Night* still haunts us.⁷ Wiesel made us watch as three prisoners were hung just before dinner one afternoon in a Nazi concentration camp. One victim, a 13-year-old too light to pull the noose tight, cannot die swiftly. For half an hour he hangs there twitching and jerking, dangling between heaven and earth. Just behind us as we watch comes the voice, "Where is God now?"

Elie Wiesel answers, "He is right here, hanging on these gallows." We who preach Christ crucified say the same thing. Though we whisper out of respect, we speak the truth, for God in Christ appears in every Godforsaken place we can imagine—from Kosovo's killing fields to the hell the young suicide you buried skirted for so long but finally fell headlong into, only to land square in the embrace of Thomas' twin, and Judas' only friend, he of the ruined hands.

God keeps calling, too, using our voices. "Where are you?" we call out to those hiding naked in the bushes—the thickets of addiction and the swamps of fear, any place where we hide our real selves for shame while we send out some amusing holograph of ourselves to go through the motions of personhood. Where are we? God knows; it's a cinch we don't.

Where two or three gather to study Torah or ponder the good news, God comes among us, and God makes that place God's own place. God sets a place for us at the table. We say sweet and truthful things to one another, we and God. God says, "You are my child, my beloved, the delight of my soul." And we say in response,

How wonderful, how beautiful
The sight of thee must be—
Thine endless wisdom, boundless pow'r,
And awesome purity!

⁷Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960; New York: Bantam Books, 1982).

My God, how wonderful thou art,
Thou everlasting friend!
On thee I stay my trusting Heart
Till faith in vision end.⁸

At these gatherings, it's the preacher's job to name the place we find ourselves this time; to describe its dimensions, dangers, and delights; to declare it God's place as well as ours. Where have we met this week? Is it a dimly lit room on the Thursday of the new commandment? A locked room on the night of the first day of the week? A place high on a mountain where we think ourselves the last one left who's not bowed to Baal? A place by the Jabbok where God will wrestle us to a draw, knee us in the groin, but bless us as we limp off to the next place? In a boat on a storm-tossed sea, with some young hotshot back there sleeping in the stern by the rudder? A ditch on the road to Jericho where we will make an amazing discovery and find ourselves in a half-dead guy? In the prison where we tossed our colleague right after the King forgave us everything?

Those who proclaim have other roles, too. They are children of Jacob, of Israel who wrestles with God, but not so often the offspring of Rachel, the wife Jacob loved. Rather, we are children of Leah, the wife who wasn't loved, the wife whose womb God opened precisely because she wasn't loved. Leah tried so hard and prayed so earnestly that her husband might love her, and she knew those sons she bore would win her a place in Jacob's heart. So she named the boys "Reuben" (He has seen!), "Simeon," (He has heard!) and "Levi" (for now it must surely be that we are *joined together!*)

But Jacob did not love her. When the fourth child came, she didn't give a thought to that man who would not love her but used her body anyway. She named this son "Judah," which literally is a word that describes a gesture—throwing one's hands in the air. It's also the verb for giving thanks in Hebrew, as in, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good." The universal priestly gesture for prayer and thanksgiving comes from this word, but it's also the word you use when you've tried everything else and nothing has worked.

We do a priestly work of this sort as proclaimers, holding up in thanks those gifts and people in our communities who have offered themselves up for us and for the sake of our life together. I suppose we are Leah's

⁸"My God, How Wonderful Thou Art" in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House; Philadelphia: Board of Publications, Lutheran Church in America, 1978), # 524, sta. 2 and 5.

children when we preach at most funerals of the faithful, when all that's left, finally, is to give thanks, as with a heave towards heaven we throw our loved one back to the God who gave her to us. "Catch," we say to God, and trust those receiving hands even as did the young crucified man in Luke's gospel who died with his bedtime prayer on his lips: "Into thy hands I commit my spirit, O God, thou faithful God."

Or maybe at funerals and other moments of transition, as we're forced to march from life configured one way to a life vastly different, you aren't so much Leah's child as you are a voice crying in the wilderness. So much of the story of God's people happens in the wilderness. The wilderness stretched between bondage in Egypt and freedom in the land of promise. The wilderness also lay between exile and the homeland.

The name of the *wilderness* in the Bible's language is מִדְבָּר (*midbar*), a name that seems somehow related to the word for *word*, דָּבָר, (*dabar*) perhaps with a "from" (מִן) on it, which would make it something like, "the place beyond words."⁹ So much of our lives we live out singly and in communities or places where words fail us, where language has become meaningless. Between long life with a spouse and life without that one there lies a bleak and wordless emptiness. There is no way from addiction to wholeness, no road from exile to a homeland, except through the wordless void of wilderness.

Out there we search for words and speech, knowing only one thing for sure about this place full of burning snakes and mirages at every turn: He was here. He knows this place. For forty days he roamed this wasteland fasting 'til he got hungry enough to eat rocks, if only that would have filled him up. But no, he left us that word from the older wilderness sojourn: Even here we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. The hunger he knew that day followed him all the way to the cross, when once more a nameless tempter called to him, "If you are the son of God, come down from there!" Even this place he knows. Even this place beyond words is his place. That is the message.

The message is from God. That's the title of this talk. I came by that title in a time-honored fashion. I stole it. It's someone else's line. It's the

⁹ It's a stretch, but Ralph Klein said he couldn't verify or debunk the notion—though Exodus 23:7 (מִדְבַר-שָׁקֵר תִּרְחֹק) "keep yourself far from empty speech," would suggest how the word would look if it were related that way.

second sentence of Richard R. Caemmerer's *Preaching for the Church*.¹⁰ I chose that sentence partly to honor that sainted, saintly man of God. In his later years he was my teacher, but he was also the teacher of everyone from whom I learned to preach, including my father and the whole generation of my seminary teachers. His book begins like this.

Preaching proclaims a message. The message is from God.... Preaching tells of God's gift of life, which [God] gives through His Son Jesus Christ, who died on the Cross and rose again that we might live.

Preaching does more than tell of this gift of life. It gives it. Through preaching God tells of His life to the world, but more: through preaching God gives Himself to the world.

Hence the preacher is God's tool to restore God's life in people. Preaching utters words. Yet when it is truly preaching, it is the Word of God to [humankind] and the power of God at work in [them].¹¹

We speak the words. We write them, we sweat over them, we stumble and weep over them. But they aren't ours. The message is from God. In the end, our wounds don't belong to us either—they belong to God and to that Son of his with those ruined hands.

There's one more comfort to name here. What comes of our preaching doesn't belong to us either, thankfully. Long before I ever imagined I might one day preach, I learned that truth in this prayer:

Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, unto Thy Church Thy Holy Spirit and the wisdom which cometh down from above, that Thy Word, as becometh it, may not be bound, but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people, that in steadfast faith we may serve thee and in the confession of thy name abide unto the end ...¹²

In time, my father, acting as my confirmation instructor as well as my first, and probably best, homiletics teacher, bade me memorize this text from Isaiah 55 (in the King James, of course)—these are words no preacher leaves home without.

¹⁰Richard R. Caemmerer, *Preaching for the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959).

¹¹Ibid., 1, edited to make language more inclusive.

¹²"The Collect for the Church" in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, 14.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and return not thither 'til they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and prosper in the thing for which I sent it (Isa 55:10-11).

Maybe, just maybe, a flower does grow for every drop of rain that falls! Yes, the message is from God. And so it returns to God, as do we when our words are spent, and our voices fall silent as have our fathers' and mothers' in the faith.

I opened this talk with tales of a Doo-Wop version of "How Great Thou Art." I close with a turn-of-the-century prayer (that is, turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century) given me by Robert Benne, our colleague for this year here at Valparaiso. As best I can tell it's a sacristy prayer, the kind of thing that guest preachers find on a sacristy wall and read out of sheer curiosity just before they step into the sanctuary for worship.

O Lord, give thy servant this Sunday morning, the eye of an eagle that he may see sin from afar. Put his hands to the gospel pulpit; glue his ears to the gospel telephone and connect him with the Glory in the skies. Illuminate his brow with a holy light that will make the fires of hell look like a tallow candle. Bow his head down in humility, in that lonesome valley where the pearl of truth is much needed to be said. Grease his lips with possum oil to make it easy for love to slip out of his mouth ...

Turpentine his imagination; electrify his brain with the power of the Word. Put perpetual motion in his arms. Fill him full of the dynamite of Thy awful power; anoint him all over with the kerosene of Thy salvation, and then, O Lord, set him on fire with the spirit of the Holy Ghost. Amen.¹³

¹³ Orrin Stone, in *For All The Saints: A Prayer Book For and By the Church*, 4 vols., ed. Frederick J. Schumacher with Dorothy A. Zelenko (Delhi, NY: The American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 1994–1996), 3:1076–77. The prayer seems to have some connection of James Weldon Johnson's poetry. Cf. a version of this prayer embedded in "Listen Lord: A Prayer," in James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York: Viking Press, 1959), 13–15.