

# Preaching in a Post-Truth Era

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## Abstract

*In this paper, the question of whether Christian preaching is implicated in the growing movement of populism is posed. The paper has identified three critical issues that call for investigation in homiletical hermeneutics. The first issue addresses the problem of biblical interpretation for homiletic practice. The second issue has to do with the impact of social media that often distorts the truth. Alarming dependence on the smart phone suggests that the task of the preacher in this rapidly changing visual and high tech culture is to deliver sermons that are critically aware of visual culture rather than literary culture. Finally, the paper calls for an approach to preaching that seeks to reveal missing, hidden and distorted truth as a way to speak against the demonic power of the profit-driven capitalism and the epidemic of gender-based violence against women and sexual minorities.*

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## 1. Introduction

This article explores the question, “What is the role of preaching in a Post-Truth era?” At heart, it asks whether there is a co-relation between the recent political populist movement and the practice of preaching. Or to put it more bluntly, it poses the question of whether the current rise of far-right and fascist politics around the world has something to do with the legacy of Christendom, and by extension with practices of Christian preaching. The pulpit has been used for propaganda purposes, “sending believers off to the Crusades and to support wars of all kinds. Christian preaching has also supported slavery, racism, and the oppression of women, gays, and lesbians.”<sup>1</sup>

As a person teaching and researching homiletics it is important to do some self-examination and own my complicity, complacency, resistance, and vulnerability. In this vein, it may be useful to raise three critical issues that homileticians and preachers need to address in a Post-Truth era marked by exclusion, division, polarization and violence.

The first issue raised here is the critical role of homiletical hermeneutics. By homiletical hermeneutics I mean interpretative lenses preachers use when reading biblical texts for preaching. Here I identify three pitfalls that preachers must heed as far as scriptural interpretation and exegesis

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers. An Ethic of Preaching*, Louisville 2002, 83.

is concerned: a literal view of Scripture, selective forgetfulness, and value-neutral historical biblical criticism. I argue that these pitfalls lead to apolitical preaching, a move that may end up contributing to populist, xenophobic, misogynist and exclusive ideologies.

The second issue examined is the impact of social media, especially focusing on visual images as media that affect the way we hear things and thus necessitating being taken into consideration by preachers. Once the powerful influence of visual media is discussed, we will turn to the impact of smart phone or screen culture in reducing the congregation's attention span as a challenge for preachers and hearers of the sermon. The impact of visual social media invites preachers to rediscover the biblical stories as visual scenes as well as narratives.

Finally, taking up the two issues raised above, I suggest that preachers are called to expose violence understood as profit-driven capitalism at a global scale and the sexual abuse and domestic violence against women.

## 2. Note on “Post-Truth Era”

In 2016, the word “post-truth” was chosen as the Oxford Dictionaries’ Word of the Year.<sup>2</sup> It was coined in reference to the result of the 2016 Brexit referendum and the media coverage of the US presidential election of 2016.<sup>3</sup> The term, “post-truth era” was first used by Ralph Keyes in 2004 in his book where he argued that deception is becoming more prevalent in the social media-driven world. He was particularly concerned about misleading statements made by the US Bush administration after 9/11 and Britain’s Blair’s weapons of mass destruction rhetoric.<sup>4</sup>

Drawing from the historical development of the terms “post-truth” and “post-truth era” referring to the political scene in the US and UK, we can say the post-truth phenomenon has something to do with political lies that are viewed as acceptable and with news reporting which is not based on proven facts. Thus, here truth is understood as facts, mainly facts reported in journalism. When facts are concealed or fabricated, news becomes misleading and that is how another term “fake news” has appeared as a related neologism. One may wonder how fake news becomes accepted as truth. A cognitive neurology study offers an answer: repetition creates a sense that misinformation is true. What this means is that even if we know that something is not true, if we are exposed constantly and repeatedly to the claim that it is, our brain will eventual accept it as

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<sup>2</sup> *Alison Flood*, ‘Post-truth’ named word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries, in: *The Guardian* (16 November 2016).

<sup>3</sup> *Daniel W. Drezner*, Why the post-truth political era might be around for a while, in: *The Washington Post* (16 June 2016).

<sup>4</sup> *Ralph Keyes*, *The Post-Truth Era. Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*, New York 2004.

truth. That is how commercialized advertisements work. That is also why fake news continues relatively unchallenged. Julian Matthews, a cognitive scientist, provides ways to resist being coopted by fake news. This includes critical probing, asking such questions as who benefits from such fake news?, what are its sources?, and what type of content is it?<sup>5</sup> This discipline of critical probing as remedy to fake news suggested by the work of neuroscientists informs the role of preaching in a post-truth era.

The other point to be made, referring to the terms “post-truth” and “post-truth era,” is that with the increase of fake news, prejudices that do not deserve a public platform are shared widely in public spaces. Such platforms as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram allow blunt racist remarks, misogynist views, Islamophobia, homophobia and anti-Jewish prejudices to be spoken. Thus, it is imperative to address preaching as a public act (mostly public speech) within these heavily politicized social media contexts. Preaching is always a political and public act addressed to a corporate ecclesial body made up of people whose lives are daily impacted by the principalities and powers in the world. Thus, attention to violent speech including hate speech and its impact on the congregation should be an essential part of preaching.

### 3. Biblical hermeneutics for Homiletics in a Post-Truth Era

There are at least three challenges that the preacher needs to consider when engaging the biblical interpretation to preach in a Post-Truth Era. The first challenge is the literal understanding of the Bible. That preaching appeals to the authority of scripture remains central and foundational. The challenge comes, however, when the proclamation of the *Word* of God is equated with and identical to *words* (small letter) in Scripture. We as preachers and researchers of preaching must constantly remind ourselves to distinguish these two lest we fall into the trap of biblical literalism. We need to constantly teach current and future preachers that The Word (*logos*) of God in Christian preaching refers to Jesus Christ, his ministry and his teaching of love, peace, justice, and mercy and not to every word in the Bible. In Jewish faith, God’s self-disclosure is revealed in Torah, while in Christian faith, the divine self-disclosure is incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth. When we say that “the Bible – as a collection of writings by human beings – is *the word of God*, we are speaking figuratively [...]. This metaphor (“the Bible is the word of God”) expresses God’s self-disclosure through conversation.”<sup>6</sup> To proclaim the incarnational nature of Jesus Christ as fully human and

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<sup>5</sup> Julian Matthew, How fake news gets into our minds, and what you can do to resist it, in: The Conversation <https://theconversation.com/profiles/julian-matthews-566547> [accessed on May 7 2019].

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Van Seters, Preaching and Ethics, St. Louis 2004, 112. The emphasis is original.

fully divine is an enigma; it is a statement of paradoxical faith. The message “the Word was God and the Word became flesh” (John 1:1.14) that captures the incarnational faith is obviously not something any preacher can fully deliver in a sermon. However, that preachers are limited in their abilities to proclaim the Word, does not mean that they cannot or should not preach. In fact, the opposite is true. Through the imperfect act of proclamation, the Word can be made manifest. Preachers are broken vessels through which the divine light by grace may shine.<sup>7</sup> As Karl Barth argued, preachers should be able to distinguish the “threefold form” of the word of God: Jesus Christ as one Word of God, the Sacred Scriptures as witness to him, and preaching as the word of God, attesting to him here and now.<sup>8</sup> While God is unknowable and far beyond human comprehension, God is also encountered and experienced as being as close as our breath. Both preacher and congregation are touched by the transcendence of God in worship, as the divine voice is heard in the human echo. Within this paradox, one must learn to distinguish between the divine voice and the human voice.

Discerning the voice witnessed in Scripture is a difficult task for preachers. The Bible does not give a simple and clear prescription the way a pharmacist might. It is descriptive, filled with open-ended and multiple insights. That is where the role of the Spirit comes in. The reformers strengthened the tradition of reliance upon the Spirit to makes things clear, at least discernible, for preachers and those who encounter Scripture. Scriptural interpretation must be guided by the Spirit who accompanies us to dance between ambiguity and clarity. In a biblical literalist approach there is no ambiguity. Unfortunately, this literal treatment of the Bible appeals to some today, and it is made more acceptable by the fact that we live in a biblically illiterate world. Many of us living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have not grown up knowing the Bible stories that were once taught at home, church and school. My personal teaching experience may illustrate this reality. A few years ago, I was teaching a course to first year seminarians. Some were in their 20s or 30s. One day, I was trying to get them to think about how gender roles are involved in finding their voice as preachers. Women preachers must wrestle with the stereotypes that church and society put on women, a stereotype that sees the appropriate place for women as being at home, raising children, doing kitchen work and cleaning. In this discussion, I said, something like, “don’t be like Martha.” Many young students thought that I was talking about Martha Stewart, the CEO of the Martha Stewart Living, instead of knowing that I was referring to the story of Martha and Mary (Luke 6:38–42).

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<sup>7</sup> *Gordon Lathrop*, *The Pastor: A Spirituality*, Minneapolis 2011, 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Karh Barth*, *Homiletik. Wesen und Vorbereitung der Predigt* Zurich 1960, 30, cited in: *Andrea Bieler/Hans-Martin Gutmann*, *Embodying Grace. Proclaiming Justification in the Real World*, trans. Linda A. Maloney, Minneapolis 2010, 180.

That is the reality for some young people today, even those raised in the church. Mary Ann Beavis and I have raised this issue elsewhere: “The era when all people grew up as Christian and regularly went to church is gone. The assumption that people know the Bible cannot be taken for granted – even among church-goers [...]. People do not know what is in the Bible, therefore, it is easy to be misguided, to submit to an ideology, whether it be of Fundamentalism or Anti-Semitism or of facile rejection of Christianity [...]. Not moving beyond a literal, superficial understanding of the Bible is dangerous because a literalist’s position can easily slip into taking a fundamental position [...]. As long as we continue to live in a biblically and religiously illiterate world, religious violence will be more likely to occur.”<sup>9</sup>

The second challenge for homiletical hermeneutics that may contribute to the populist movement involves “selective forgetfulness.”<sup>10</sup> This concept refers to a false reading strategy that tells one side of the story while masking the other side. One example of this is the portrayal of David in the Book of Samuel as a great king while neglecting his murder of Uriah and infidelity with his wife Bathsheba. As a result of such a cover up, a complicated truth about David is disguised or distorted and sometimes denied. Such autocratic selections turn the pulpit into “a private forum” in which the preacher gets into an unhelpful habit of choosing his or her favorite texts to preach on as if the serious task of revealing complicated stories in the text is a leisure akin to “riding personal hobby horses.”<sup>11</sup> This selective forgetfulness is a common (mal)practice where the solo preacher uses his or her power to singlehandedly choose passages for preaching. Such selective forgetfulness is typified in many expository sermons when a preacher will go verse by verse giving the illusion of a deep reading of scripture when in fact, what is often missing is the relevant context needed to faithfully interpret. This pattern has been derived from the Puritan style of sermon. While this kind of preaching may be effective in some contexts, the danger is that it often fails to locate the chosen text in wider contexts. It is like a study of Martin Luther King Jr’s sermons without locating them in the civil rights movement. To locate the text in the context leads to “an investigation of the social and political conditions prevailing at the time of composition.”<sup>12</sup> Failure to locate it means that texts are held captive to the preacher’s individual biases or opinions resulting in “false” if not “fake” sermons. Selective forgetfulness and the practice of choosing biblical texts that only show one side of the story become particularly dangerous when coupled

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<sup>9</sup> *Mary Ann Beavis/HyeRan Kim-Cragg, What Does the Bible Say? A Critical Conversation with Popular Culture in a Biblically Illiterate World*, Eugene 2017, xi.

<sup>10</sup> *Justo González, Out of Every Tribe and Nation: Christian Theology at the Ethnic Roundtable*, Nashville 1992, 40.

<sup>11</sup> *Thomas Long, The Witness of Preaching 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, Louisville 2005, 73.

<sup>12</sup> *Temba L. J. Mafico, Biblical Exegesis and its Shortcomings in Theological Education*, in: *Teaching the Bible. The Discourse and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*, ed. Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, Minneapolis 2009, 255–271, 255.

with a literal interpretation of the Bible. When people lack a critically well-informed view of Scripture and this combines with selective forgetfulness, it is easy to be misled and to submit to such ideologies as anti-Semitism, anti-climate change, anti-choice, anti-refugee/migrants, and anti-Islam to name a few. This is how and why biblical interpretation is critical for preaching lest it should conceal the populist agenda.

Thirdly, there is a challenge for homiletical hermeneutics in a post-truth era that comes from historical biblical criticism that assumes value neutrality, and scientific objectivity. The historical criticism is neither objective nor neutral because it only provides “*the* definitive and universal meaning in the biblical text” for privileged readers who are in power.<sup>13</sup> One of the dominant methods in biblical criticism, John McClure argues, is to assume “a unitary, transcendental and masterful author behind every author of the biblical text.”<sup>14</sup> However, it is not hard to find the biblical evidence that contests this assumption. On one occasion, for example, Paul’s writing records that women and men exercised leadership in the early church (1Cor 2:5), yet a few chapters later in the same book, Paul restricts the ministries women might exercise in the church (1Cor 14:34–36). In Genesis, one passage talks about God creating men and women equally in the image of God (Gen 1:26), while in the next chapter, God creates woman out of the man’s rib (Gen 2). As a matter of fact, there is diversity, not uniformity, of Scripture. The truth about Scripture lies in its multiplicity which “testifies to its depth: two testaments, four gospels, contrasting points of view held in tension.”<sup>15</sup> The Bible, containing the only or the objective truth, then becomes a measuring stick used to judge others and sometimes even becomes a stick to beat and punish those who do not measure up. This use of the Bible in preaching has been around longer and has been more prevalent than we want to admit.

This triple hermeneutical problem, literal understanding, selective forgetfulness, and the assumed neutral objectivity of historical criticism, poses a real danger to the preachers’ ability to address issues of pressing importance from the pulpit. These harmful approaches to Scripture have contributed to a cynical view of Christianity and damaged some Christians who have ended up leaving the church. David Kinnaman, through his qualitative research on people dissatisfied with Christianity, demonstrates the way ideas of the literal truth of Scripture, selective reading, and supposed objectivity of historical criticism of the Bible feeds a metanarrative; namely, that

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<sup>13</sup> Gale Yee, *The Author/Text/Reader and Power. Suggestions for a Critical Framework for Biblical Studies*, in: F. Segovia/M. Tolbert (eds.), *Reading from this Place. Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, Minneapolis 1995, 113. The emphasis is original.

<sup>14</sup> *John McClure, Other-wise Preaching. A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics*, St. Louis 2001 14.

<sup>15</sup> *A Song of Faith*, <https://www.united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/song-faith>.

Christian Scripture contains the capital *The* only truth and makes universal claims about what human beings are, who they should be, who is saved, who has sinned, who is blessed, and who is cursed.<sup>16</sup>

These three pitfalls of biblical interpretation are prominent in ushering in deductive preaching. While not all deductive preaching is unhelpful, Pablo A. Jiménez critiques the expository form of the preaching as “colonial” which was imported and transplanted by “the British rationalistic homiletic school, exemplified by Charles Haddon Spurgeon and John A. Broadus” around the world during the colonial era. It is also “monological,” he adds, featuring “a scholarly discourse preached by an authoritative figure,” proclaiming “the” truth of the Gospel, while assuming the role of the pew as dependent listeners to be enlightened.<sup>17</sup>

David Lose, overcoming these pitfalls, claims that preaching is at a crossroads and that the unified, literalist, objective treatment of the biblical interpretation no longer appeals to many and/or does not make sense. To people who are influenced by feminist, postmodern, postcolonial, and pluralist worldviews, such preaching of proclaiming the universal and exclusive message, holds little value and does not help to counter the pressures of individualism, consumerism, and nationalism.<sup>18</sup> A healthy homiletical approach to biblical interpretation, therefore, is interested in the readers whose lives are deeply influenced by current political contexts and ideologies. These contexts and ideologies can differ greatly such that the same passage in Scripture may suggest quite different meanings. The Exodus story, for example, as argued elsewhere, has been liberating and inspiring for those readers who yearn for freedom and independence and those who experienced dictatorship and oppression.<sup>19</sup> However, the same Exodus story of God leading the people of Israel to the promised land has been used to justify colonialism, and so it has not been liberating for those people whose land has been taken.<sup>20</sup> That is why Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza claims that “it is not only the intention of the ‘original authors’ that must be considered, but also the manner in which texts and interpretations of texts have functioned in historical and political settings.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> David Kinnaman, *Unchristian. What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity ... And Why It Matters*, Grand Rapids 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Pablo A. Jiménez, “If You Just Close Your Eyes: Postcolonial Perspectives on Preaching from the Caribbean”, in: *Homiletic* 40:1 (2015), 23

<sup>18</sup> David Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads. How the World and Our Preaching Are Changing*, Minneapolis 2013.

<sup>19</sup> HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *Story and Song. A Postcolonial Interplay between Christian Education and Worship*, New York 2012, 32.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Allen Warrior, *Canaanites, Cowboys and Indians. Deliverance, Conquest, Liberation Theology Today*, in: *Christianity and Crisis* 1989, 21–27.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic. The Politics of Biblical Studies*, Minneapolis 1999, 28.

In short, an interpretive remedy for fake news is critically questioning who said what, (content), where (source), and why (benefit). Similarly, preachers must be equipped to challenge the literal interpretation of Scripture (which serves as an excuse to exclude, discriminate, and condemn), while investigating the habit of selective reading of Scripture (which conceals complex facts) and avoiding the myth of neutrality and objectivity (which privileges a certain group in power).

#### **4. The Roles of Social Media for Preaching in a Post-Truth Era**

Karl Barth upon his retirement in 1963 advised young theologians to “take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.” “Journalists form public opinion,” he continued to say, and therefore “[t]hey hold terribly important positions.”<sup>22</sup> Barth was right about the impact of the news media on the world and its importance for those in the pulpit and the pews. Being cognizant of the impact of the secular news, however, he made a counter-argument, stressing the importance of the homiletical orientation to God revealed in scripture for interpreting the worldly news.

56 years later in the age of Facebook and Twitter, Barth’s words continue to be relevant. We cannot escape the “terrible important position” of social media and journalism for us today. Preachers and their parishioners are bombarded by news coming over these digital waves. People in today’s world are caught like flies in the internet, struggling to know what to believe and who is telling the truth. Richard Ward diagnoses the problem in this way: “Digital technologies transmit voices that are crisp and clear of distortion. Celebrity speakers and broadcasters dominate the airwaves, setting standards (for good or ill) for speaking in public. The energized barrage of digitalized voices making sales pitch after pitch leaves listeners skeptical of truth claims and hungry for authenticity.”<sup>23</sup> Many hearers including people in the pew are misled. Many preachers are either at a loss of what to do, or in a state of denial. Other preachers at the opposite side of the spectrum are over-worried about and having a hard time discerning how to lead the flock in this highly digitized technological world. But preachers cannot afford to be overwhelmed or indifferent. They have a critical role to play in proclaiming the Good News in a world of virtual and digitalized spaces.

These challenges are not about to go away any time soon. Thus, homiletics engaging more vigorously with these challenges is in order. A place to start is by analyzing two-related modes of

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<sup>22</sup> Barth in Retirement, in: Time Magazine, Friday, May 31, 1963.

<sup>23</sup> *Richard Ward*, Finding Voice in the Theological School, in: Jana Childers/Clayton J. Schmit (eds.), *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, Grand Rapids 2008, 139f.



social media. One is the visual image that is such a powerful component of digital communication. The other is the smart phone which takes up a large portion of people's attention in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Both modes have positive and negative implications for preaching.

On a positive side, many homileticians who believe in the power of narrative, including panoramic salvation narratives in the Bible, called for making biblical stories as scenic in preaching.<sup>24</sup> Alyce McKenzie has recently asserted the power of “scenes” or word pictures that abound in the Bible as she offers a definition of the scene in preaching as “a unit of human perception” or “a vivid version” captured in the biblical story that gains and holds “attention, providing compelling conveyances for exegetical and theological teaching.”<sup>25</sup> Many stories in the Bible often contain a story event within a story as a plot that includes contentious characters and a degree of conflict, in the case of the King David story raised earlier. That is why sermons could function best as narrative form having a plot as Eugene Lowry presented.<sup>26</sup> In order for a narrative to become a scene, the mode of preaching has to have an element of ‘show’ rather than merely ‘tell.’ This is where a power of visual image, arousing a sense of sight and not just of hearing, becomes particularly critical in preaching for the people today who are smartphone watchers rather than hearers of radios or readers of books and newspapers.

On a negative side of over-dependence of the visual image in social media, with regards to the impact of the smart phone, McKenzie acutely observes that as “screen and attention span have shrunk, so has the faith of many people in panoramic salvation metanarratives captured in the Bible from Exodus, exile, advent, the cross, and the empty tomb, to Pentecost that is unfolding in preaching event.”<sup>27</sup> The attention span of most people in the pews today has been shortening because more and more people are struggling with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Yet, at the same time people are hardwired to make connections with stories in the world and those of our lives. But these stories people seek to connect with are not necessarily captured in the epic novels or concise poetry books. They are mostly presented and consumed through the visual media including YouTube, a medium that was only created less than 15 years ago. This relatively young age medium has three billion views every day and its number is growing as every minute more videos are uploaded on a smartphone, another young in age that changed the world with the unveiling of the iPhone in 2007. People in the pews today are less used to

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<sup>24</sup> E. g., *Tom Troeger*, *Imaging a Sermon* Nashville, 1990. *Paul Scott Wilson*, *The Four Pages of the Sermon. A Guide to Biblical Preaching*, Nashville 1999.

<sup>25</sup> *Alyce McKenzie*, *Making a Scene in the Pulpit: Vivid Preaching for Visual Listeners*, Louisville 2018, 3.4.

<sup>26</sup> *Eugene L. Lowry*, *The Homiletical Plot. The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, Louisville 1980.

<sup>27</sup> *McKenzie* (note 25), 2.

listening to radio to get news. Many people read neither books nor newspapers in printed forms. Instead they watch news through their palm size smartphone and upload such videos as YouTube. Attention deficiency and screen dependency have a close connection and they have a huge implication for preaching. The traditional sermon that relies on 15–30 minute, one-way communication without visual aids has a real challenge to make a connection to its audience in today's world. Should preachers reduce their sermons to 3–5 minute blurbs to be more in line with the average You-Tube clip? Should preachers turn their sermon into commercial advertisements, episodic, flashy, excessive, or hyper-stimulating?

While such drastic change of preaching may not be feasible, desirable, or realistic, the influence of the visual image in social media should not be underestimated but deserves proper attention. McKenzie's plea to visual listeners of sermons in a world of smartphone and the You-Tube era, yields constructive insights. Preachers need to enhance their ways of reading the Bible as visual stories with plots and movements for the sake of preaching. Preachers need to present God as holistic scene maker who cares for people not just as one-dimensional listeners but as multi-dimensional creatures fascinated by images. Preachers connecting God with people must invite and evoke people to experience the scenic narrative power to touch them deeply. This connecting role of preaching is particularly important when our lives in a highly politicized post-truth era are fractured, distracted, incoherent, and therefore disconnected from larger stories that are beyond our own, including God's. Theologically speaking, to pay attention to scenes in preaching is to try to connect the lives of listeners to the overarching salvation plots or panoramic narratives of creation, fall, redemption, and recreation that God has initiated and continues to initiate. These overarching panoramic narratives of the divine embrace connect episodic, seemingly disjointed-looking stories and events of fragmented human lives into a whole.

In short, gauging both positive and negative impact of the visual images in social media, we need to make a critical point about how these visual images are connected to fake news, as a way to tell lies and distort facts and truths in a post-truth era. Thousands of these images flash across our lives each day in the fast-moving whirlwind world of social media. Seeing is believing and the medium is the message as Marshall McLuhan eloquently put it in 1967.<sup>28</sup> Around the same time that Barth and McLuhan were thinking about the influence of media in the 1960s, the World Council of Churches was encouraging member churches to create sermons that included visual arts.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Marshall McLuhan*, *The Medium is the Message. An Inventory of Effects*, London 1967.

<sup>29</sup> Norman Goodall (ed.) *The Uppsala Report 1968*, Geneva 1968, 81f.

On a negative side, visual images, while subtle, can be a powerful conveyor of information, values and attitudes. Culture, which is often reflected in visual images, shapes our thinking and our actions as well as our knowing.<sup>30</sup> A visual quality of story can foster the imagination of the listeners. It is not enough to use these optical representations or word pictures inherently good. Visual images can distort truth and reinforce oppressive structures of dominance. The blonde-haired, blue-eyed, and white-skinned Jesus presented “under the guise of scientific and rational objectivity” as if it were factually true is one particularly important example of a powerful image that distorts the truth.<sup>31</sup> Seeing is powerful because “the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe [...]. We are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves.”<sup>32</sup> It is not difficult to find examples of how the visual images, a painting, a sculpture or a photo could change the relation between things and ourselves in a world. Visual images as medium conveying a message in a powerful way may misinform facts, and mask truths, truths about crimes, truths about violence committed by the powerful, which we turn to next.

## 5. Preaching as Exposing Truth in a Post-Truth Era

Once the work of interpreting texts and framing their contexts in Scripture is done, preachers enter into the next homiletical movement of what to say or how to present the message. The core content of the sermon that needs to be spoken in a post-truth era must inevitably include revealing truth that has been hidden, distorted, or altered by the principalities and powers. This was at the heart of preaching in the Reformation era. For Martin Luther, to preach was to expose the ugly face of Satan as a demonic power of the world. He acknowledged that this was not an easy task. “It is the most dangerous kind of life to throw oneself in the way of Satan’s many teeth,” he wrote.<sup>33</sup> And yet, if preachers fail to address the countless powerful forces that shape and destroy human (and non-human) life in the world, as Charles Campbell argues, preaching turns into “the monstrous *homiletical* heresy.”<sup>34</sup>

For John Calvin, speaking truth as preaching is speaking about the knowledge of faith as a way of perceiving. By perceiving he meant the need to pay attention to God, mirroring God and God’s work in the world. There is a connection between revealing truth (Luther) by exposing a

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Foster, *Imperialism in the Religious Education of Cultural Minority*, in: *Religious Education* 89 (1992), 146.

<sup>31</sup> Randall Bailey, *In Danger of Ignoring One’s Own Cultural Bias in Interpreting the Text*, in: R. S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *The Postcolonial Bible. The Bible and Postcolonialism*, London 1998, 74.

<sup>32</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London 1972.

<sup>33</sup> Cited in: *Campbell* (note 1), 69.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 70. The emphasis is original.

demonic power and reflecting God's activity in the act of preaching (Calvin). The contemporary Reformed homileticians share similar views with these two reformers. Charles Campbell and Johan Cilliers develop an insight into how preachers might become truth revealers holding up a mirror to the congregation in preaching. This is effectively done when preachers embrace their roles as fools for Christ.<sup>35</sup> "The Emperor's New Clothes," a story created by Hans Christian Andersen, offers a salient example in this regard. This story is not just an entertaining tale but a powerful story depicting the subversive wisdom of the lower classes who mock the Emperor by playing fools. Unless you are foolish, you would not dare to confront the Emperor this way. However, the story depicts that it is through the seemingly innocent utterance of the child that the truth is revealed. This foolish act of the powerless child exposes the stupidity of the exulted and mighty Emperor. The story points to Empire, with which many of us are complicit, and from which some benefit far more than others. It is a candid example of speaking the truth (as oppression and injustice of the imperial power) that was revealed by a child through an act of bold innocence.<sup>36</sup>

What are the demonic powers of the world in a post-truth era that need revealing through preaching? What are the faces of these monsters that require unmasking in preaching today? There are many demonic faces.<sup>37</sup> One such demonic face is Capitalism. Andrea Bieler and Hans-Martin Gutmann, facing the global economic crisis that shook the world in 2008, juxtapose divine grace with the market driven profit economy and argued for preaching justification. They juxtapose the exploitation of human labour and the land for the sake of the superfluous profit with the inexhaustible and intractable grace of God.<sup>38</sup> Human greed is defeated by the divine grace in preaching. This juxtaposition when outlined in preaching reveals the truth that confronts the evil powers and satanic principalities exercised by neoliberal capitalism today.<sup>39</sup>

Another example of a demonic power is sexual and domestic violence against women and sexual minority groups. Gender-based violence against women has existed as long as patriarchy has.<sup>40</sup> Yet, statistics tell us that this age-old sexual and domestic violence committed by men has escalated in recent years. In the era of the "Me-Too movement" a term coined by activist Tarana Burke in 2006,<sup>41</sup> it is alarming but not surprising to find that sexual abuse, harassment, and assaults

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<sup>35</sup> Charles L. Campbell/Johan H. Cilliers, *Preaching Fools. The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly*, Waco 2012.

<sup>36</sup> HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *The Emperor Has No Clothes! Exposing Whiteness as Explicit, Implicit, and Null Curricula*, in: *Religious Education* (2019), DOI: 10.1080/00344087.2019.1602464

<sup>37</sup> For example, *Andrew Wymer* called fascism and racism as demonic faces that need unmasking. See his, *Punching Nazis? Preaching as Anti-Fascist Resistance*, in: *IJH* vol 3 (2018), 81–98.

<sup>38</sup> *Bieler/Gutmann* (note 8), 5.

<sup>39</sup> *Eunjo Mary Kim* names neoliberal capitalism and global climate change as challenges to preaching. *Preaching in an Age of Globalization*, Louisville 2010.

<sup>40</sup> *Emily Askew/O. Wesley Allen Jr.*, *Beyond Heterosexism in the Pulpit*, Eugene 2015, 16–20.

<sup>41</sup> 11 years later on October 5, 2017, Me-Too movement went viral when the *New York Times* and *New Yorker's*

of men against women and heterosexual men against members of the LGBTQ community take place almost ubiquitously, at home, at work, and in church and politics. It may not be coincidental that the rise of right wing politics and gender-based and sexual violence are happening concurrently. There may be a connection between religious violence and sexual violence fueled by the fear of difference, the fear of the other, due to race, religion, and gender.

In short, the fear of the other, whether the fear is toward religion, gender, or race as propellers for populist movements, leads to hatred and violence. That is why discerning the broader dimensions of violence with an analysis of fear is a critical task of preaching. Barbara Patterson contends that if our preaching is a discernment of Christ's incarnation, we must learn as preachers to be attentive to both individual and systematic violence, while discerning the violence within us, and seeking to communicate "how Christ's woundedness touches the woundedness of violated women and our own wounds."<sup>42</sup> Making the connection between fear and violence requires a spiritual discipline, constantly reflecting the current context of violence and reading the biblical texts about violence, while mirroring God's activity in the world. It also involves discerning the othering process.<sup>43</sup> Patterson asks, "How many sermons have we heard that have no shared experiences with real women who suffered violence?"<sup>44</sup> We may extend this question by asking how many sermons we have preached and heard that have shared experience with real people who suffered violence as a result of the fear of the other.

A constant self-reflective mirroring as a spiritual discernment is needed in preaching. This is what it means to unmask or uncover evil in preaching, disclosing what has been missing (not preached) or distorting complicated realities (selective forgetfulness and status quo). As a practical theological act, preaching must always speak from the edges, preaching the other.<sup>45</sup> Otherwise, preaching is in danger of serving as "an unconscious means of preserving the status quo."<sup>46</sup> To disrupt this status quo is to proclaim, as discussed earlier, the paradox of faith witnessed in Scripture. It also involves a paradoxical rhetorical claim, negotiating complexity, ambiguity, and contrasting views. The nature and the task of preaching in this regard is unsettling, interrupting, and transgressing. That is one of the most obvious paradoxical Gospel messages, captured in 'the

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investigation went into and revealed the sexual misdeeds of *Harvey Weinstein*. The #MeToo movement is now spreading to the entire globe and entering into a courageous fury over the ways women are mistreated.

<sup>42</sup> *Barbara Patterson*, Preaching as Nonviolent Resistance, in: *Telling the Truth. Preaching about Sexual and Domestic Violence*, ed. John McClure and Nancy Ramsay, Cleveland 1998, 99–109, 103.

<sup>43</sup> *Lucy A. Rose*, *Sharing the Word. Preaching in the Roundtable Church*, Louisville 1997; *John McClure*, *A Roundtable Pulpit*, Nashville 1995.

<sup>44</sup> *Patterson* (note 42), 105.

<sup>45</sup> *Ronald J. Allen*, *Preaching and the Other. Studies of Postmodern Insights*, St. Louis 2014.

<sup>46</sup> *Campbell* (note 1), 86.

last shall be the first' (Matt 20:16) and in the song of Mary (Luke 1:46-55). Such a paradoxical message is directly related to speaking to abusive power to challenge the dominant hierarchy, including the preferential option for the poor and the marginalized. That is why exposing violence as a way of speaking to power as preaching means breaking the silence for those whose voices were taken away.<sup>47</sup>

Preaching ultimately not only exposes but envisions. The last word of preaching is not death but a new life. Preaching does not stop at deconstruction but aims to transform. Envisioning is oriented to the future. Preaching as eschatological points to a reality present and not yet completely here. It is about evoking possibilities and igniting hopes.<sup>48</sup> "In the midst of the powers of death, the preacher directs the congregation's attention to glimpses of God's Shalom that is *already* breaking into the world."<sup>49</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

This article has posed the question of whether Christian preaching is implicated in the growing movements of populism and ultra-right wing politics around the globe today. It has identified three unhelpful ways to interpret Scripture as homiletical practices which may usher in or at least perpetuate fundamentalist views. The difficulty lies when the opposite argument is made that populist views claim to give voice to the people and not the elites who are blamed for injustices. The discerning Spirit must be in placed so as to clarify whether such views actually advocate for the marginalized or not.

We have noted that Scripture contains complimentary and contrasting views and that the words in the Bible should not be treated as the neutral and monolithic absolute truth that is understood literally and beyond particular contexts. Preachers are encouraged to practice looking at the larger and complicated contexts in the Bible, connecting them with current contexts that face hearers and readers today. An examination of the impact of social media in a Post-Truth era has helped us articulate the subtle yet powerful impact of the visual image that often distorts facts, even creating fake news. We live in a world where members of our congregations are heavily dependent on smart phones. Therefore, the preacher, noting their positive and negative impacts,

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<sup>47</sup> *Christine Smith*, *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance. Encountering Handicappism, Ageism, Heterosexism, Sexism, White Racism, Classism*, Louisville 1992, 131.

<sup>48</sup> *Thomas Long*, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, Louisville 2009.

<sup>49</sup> *Campbell* (note 1), 123. The emphasis is original.

needs to evoke images that resonate with the social media culture and effectively reach out to people. Such needs call for viewing the Bible, more than reading, as scenic with plots.

Finally, the article calls for preaching as speaking against the demonic power of profit driven capitalism and the epidemic of gender based violence, two evils among others which are often either unspoken or hidden. The role of preaching in this regard requires exposing and unveiling the demonic principalities. That is what it means to preach in a Post-Truth Era.

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