

THE LIGHT IN DARK PLACES

II Timothy 3:16.17: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”

Perhaps it is an indication of how strange the world of the 21st century is that I was recently asked to write an article about preaching on special occasions (or circumstances). In days past, such a topic might have referred to preaching at weddings, funerals, days of thanksgiving, or occasional services. Of course, preachers today still have to preach sermons on those occasions. But, in the world of satellite communications, 24-hour news channels, and internet immediacy, preaching on special occasions (or circumstances) may now suggest different, more ominous applications: terrorist strikes, anthrax attacks, economic crises, public disasters, and, of course, wars and rumors of wars. In such moments of darkness, we especially need the light that only comes from the Word of God. Our text, after all, says “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”

I completed the article, and frankly, it reads more like a sermon to me than an academic product. I learned a great deal in the process of researching it and I want to share some of the things I learned with you tonight. First, I want to talk with you about preaching during the “normal” times in the life of our churches, or church plants. Then, we will look at preaching occasioned by the “abnormal” events that capture the attention and focus the concerns of our congregations. Finally, we will consider three simple observations about preaching in light of the previous two discussions. Bryan Chapell writes that “the expository preaching task is to communicate what God committed to Scripture in order to give God’s people his truth for their time.”¹ Tonight we will focus only on the latter part of the statement: What does it mean “to give God’s people his truth *for their time*?”² And, at that, we will focus even more narrowly on *certain aspects* of their time.

The Normal Situation

First, it is important to examine the assumption that there is such a thing as preaching during “normal” times in our congregations. If by “normal” times we

¹ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), p. 31.

² Emphasis mine.

refer to those days of calm when we are not in the throes of shock over a space-shuttle disaster, a category four hurricane, or the derailing of an AMTRAK passenger train, then such may be described as normal. However, even when our congregations are not experiencing some public, collective trauma, it is important to remember that individual members of our congregations may be experiencing the shocks of life in all their raw power. As D.A. Carson writes, “suffering of one kind or another is always taking place.”³

In a given congregation with a couple of hundred parishioners, it is likely that someone’s mother has just received an unexpected, even devastating medical report. A father is facing cutbacks and layoffs in the workplace. Several families are experiencing conflict with children and someone’s husband is involved in an extra-marital affair. As Calvin Miller explains,

The Sunday service is a gathering of troubles. Half of those who enter the church and take their seat before the pulpit are moving in a privatized fog of their own ills. In the words of Thoreau, they are living lives of quiet desperation. They are the dying anonymous.⁴

Even a church plant with fewer numbers present is not exempt. For some of God’s children, in the space of a mere week, the normal has become radically abnormal. Last week, the Lord’s Day was an occasion of joy and praise. It was good to be in the house of the Lord! Then came the shattering blow that changed everything. The cares of this world bullied past the front door and filled the home with their oppressive, unrelenting presence. Now, gathered again to worship, these shattered people desperately need to hear a word from the Lord. For them, the abnormal has become their new normal.

I am not a pastor. I have been a pastor, but that is not currently my calling. However, I am a seminary professor and Army Reserve chaplain and so have some ongoing ministry responsibilities. Within a very short period of time, I received the following requests for prayer: for a young First Lieutenant who was nearly killed in a horrible wreck in Oklahoma, for the family of a Sergeant who was murdered, for an elderly saint who has a brain tumor, for a young woman who died suddenly from a blood clot, for the well-being of a newborn baby, for surgery to treat a serious infection, for a church member who had surgery and is unable to keep food down, for a young wife who lost her job, for a friend who has terminal liver cancer, for a former student diagnosed with breast cancer, for another friend who has a pre-ulcerous condition.

³ D.A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 221.

⁴ Calvin Miller, *Preaching: The Art of Narrative Exposition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), p. 41.

And the list goes on. Some of these prayer requests are from the congregation where I worship; others are from the seminary community or the Army Reserve command where I serve. Nearly all of these are members of some particular church, and, except for those who have died, most will be listening to some preacher this coming Lord's Day. And, as Miller writes, they are not coming to church because they want to know "whatever happened to the Hittites."⁵ They will be there because they need the fellowship and support of God's people. And, most importantly, they need to hear a word from the Lord that will give them comfort, hope, and direction. They need light in the midst of their darkness. The first thing the preacher must do, then, is get a handle on what the normal situation really is. Many in our congregations are like ducks swimming on the pond. Above the surface, everything appears calm and controlled. Unseen beneath the surface, however, little duck feet are churning at warp speed. In other words, the normal situation often isn't. In the words of Pulitzer-prize winning author, Marilynne Robinson, "There's a lot under the surface of life, everyone knows that. A lot of malice and dread and guilt, and so much loneliness, where you wouldn't really expect to find it, either."⁶

Abnormal Events

Perhaps it is the immediacy and accessibility of media that makes our time seem so frantic, so out-of-control. The closing of a small-town Chrysler dealership may have little impact on the global economy; it is, however, devastating to the 43 employees who worked there—and the "local" story may well show up on CNN's "Lou Dobbs Tonight." With never ending news cycles, we are light years from the fifteen-minute newscast of the 1950s. Whether it is an IED explosion on an Iraqi highway, an attack on hotels in Mumbai, or a backed-up toilet on the space station, everyone with a television or a personal computer has access to the latest information. The buffers of time and space have effectively evaporated, and we are all exposed to more information than we can handle, coming at us faster than we can process it. What once would have been only of peripheral interest now is thrust front and center, demanding that we give it a hearing. And, sometimes, the global village, or some significant portion thereof, is affected in a powerful way.

I was knotting my tie, glancing in the mirror to make sure I wasn't strangling myself, while watching the television out of the corner of my eye. I was thinking about the meetings I had scheduled later that day and running through the seemingly endless list of details that a seminary Vice President and Dean has to worry about. I usually waited till I arrived at the office for my morning coffee.

⁵ Ibid., p. 41.

⁶ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Picador, 2004), p. 6.

That day I was running late, and I was definitely suffering from caffeine-deficiency. But something caught my eye. I had already turned back to check on my Windsor knot when my pre-frontal cortex processed the image from the TV—I had seen, however briefly, what appeared to be a tall building on fire. I turned to look at the screen even as I reached for the remote to adjust the volume. As the sound increased I heard the FOX news team report that an airplane that had flown into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City.

Like so many other Americans, I watched in horror as another airplane screamed into the South Tower approximately seventeen minutes later. And then, one minute before ten o'clock, the South Tower crumbled, followed by the North Tower at 10:28 AM. Pearl Harbor; the Kennedy assassination; the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster; September 11, 2001. By virtue of the magnitude of the horror, the near-universality of the experience, or the immediacy of the reporting (or some combination of these factors), these events left indelible scars on the American people. What does a preacher do the Sunday after more than 3,000 people are killed in the worst terrorist attack in American history? Stick with the lectionary? Move on to the next few verses in Ephesians?

I was at a worship service the following Sunday, September 16, 2001, expecting to hear a sermon that addressed the shock, the fear, the sadness that so clearly affected everyone in the sanctuary. I was wrong. The sermon was the same sermon that had been planned weeks before. Had it not been for the pastoral prayer, which lifted up the families of those who had been killed and asked for guidance for our nation's leaders, no one in those pews that morning would have known that the horrors of 9/11 had occurred but five short days before. There is no other word for it; this was ministerial malpractice. If ever a people need a word from the Lord, it is at those times when we are reminded afresh that life is relentlessly contingent and hangs by a mere thread, it is "a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" (James 4:14). This was one of those times. And instead of edible bread, indeed, Living Bread, we received a homiletical brick.

The second thing the preacher must do, then, is develop the wisdom to know when to adjust the sermon to address an "abnormal event" and cultivate the skills to do so with agility. Such wisdom will probably come only with experience, and the agility to shift "on the fly" is as much a developed skill-set as it is a temperament trait.⁷ Mostly, however, the preacher needs to be sensitive to the

⁷ Preachers who experience the turbulence of ongoing pastoral ministry very quickly learn how to improvised, adapt, and overcome. How much sermon preparation time has been eaten up by unscheduled but necessary ministry to the seriously ill, the dying, or the bereaved? Every preacher knows how often preparation time for planned public ministry is trumped by the exigencies of the unexpected. Some preachers seem naturally disposed to adjusting quickly while others struggle to manage the competing, often conflicting demands on their time.

needs of the flock and open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. And, when in doubt, shine the light of God's Word in the direction of the darkness.

Three Things

In light of the previous two big points, there are many more things that could be said. However, I will limit my comments to three simple observations. First, simple observation: the minister who seeks to be a faithful shepherd must remember that he preaches, not in a vacuum, but to flesh and blood people who are immersed up to their necks in life. This means it is never enough for the preacher simply to "give the meaning of the text." Some preachers confuse the exegesis of the text with exposition of the text. Fred Craddock warned:

It is possible that a sermon that buries itself in the text, moves through it phrase by phrase, and never comes up for air may prove to be "unbiblical" in the sense that it fails to achieve what the text achieves.⁸

The faithful preacher, who seeks transformation and healing in his congregation, will be ever mindful of the interplay between the context of the Scripture and the context of his listeners. John Stott writes that we need preachers

who struggle to relate God's unchanging Word to our ever-changing world; who refuse to sacrifice truth to relevance or relevance to truth; but who resolve instead in equal measure to be faithful to Scripture and pertinent to today.⁹

Such preaching requires more than reading the daily newspaper or following the evening news, though it certainly requires no less. Just as the shepherd of old knew his sheep, even so the under-shepherd of God's flock must know his sheep and care for them tenderly. There are wounds that need binding, and the role of the preacher is interwoven with the role of the pastor. Is it strange that, almost as soon as he mentions the Chief Shepherd, Peter reminds his readers to cast their cares on him, "because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7)? Sinclair Ferguson writes "we have to understand the soul condition of those to whom we preach, and address them in an appropriate way."¹⁰ Training in righteousness, then, is more than throwing

⁸ Fred Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), p. 28.

⁹ John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 144.

¹⁰ Sinclair Ferguson, "Preaching to the Heart," in *Feed My Sheep*, Don Kistler, ed. (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2002), p. 204.

doctrinal truths at parishioners. The preacher must bring the Word of God and the listener into vital connection through skilful exposition and application.

Second simple observation: the preacher needs to preach the whole counsel of God. “All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable”—and this means preaching that a sovereign God is in control of life’s circumstances, even when the gears are grinding, the temperature gauge is in the red, and the wheels are about to come off. D.A. Carson addresses the problem of ministering to those who encounter suffering and evil. He makes the observation that

part of learning to live as faithful children of the sovereign God is therefore tied to trusting him when he can at best be only dimly discerned behind events and circumstances that the Bible itself is quick to label evil.¹¹

To preach “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), the preacher must be prepared to deal with the hard subjects, including the decrees of God. To be sure, the Westminster Confession warns that “the doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care” (WCF 3:8)—and so it should. But avoiding these matters entirely is hardly handling them with special prudence and care. Avoidance is not a method of engagement.

The doctrine of God’s decrees, predestination, providence—these are the doctrines that are the most difficult to reconcile with events of monumental evil. In the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks, how many times did you hear the question, “Where was God on 9/11?” Or, as one hears in the “normal situations” of life, “Where was God when I lost my job? . . . or became ill? . . . or lost my loved one?” It is at such painful points, whether experienced by individuals or collectively by a people, that we find it is most difficult to reconcile our profession with our experience. When God does *not* act predictably, i.e., as *we expect him to act*, we can find our faith challenged and our previous understanding of God inadequate. Most pointedly, we may flinch at the notion that God ordained *this* for his own glory and become stupefied by the thought that God will use *this* for our highest good.

What we experience in life can create powerful cognitive dissonance as our reflections on our experience clash with what we believe to be true. For that reason, it is all the more important to preach about the attributes of God, to proclaim clearly and repeatedly that our God is our loving heavenly father (Matthew 7:11). That our God is concerned about those things that concern us (Matthew 6:31-33). That our God is at work even in the midst of evil to bring about the good ends that he has always intended (Genesis 50:20, Romans 8:28).

¹¹ Carson, p. 65.

The preacher must treat these doctrines not as abstract concepts, but as the lifeblood of evangelical religion. Cold, abstract speculations will do little to grant comfort in the midst of trouble; but the confidence that God *is* at work will comfort God's people (Acts 27:21-26) in the midst of trouble (2 Corinthians 1:3-7). These doctrines are perishable and we must preach them frequently if we wish to fortify the soul.

Third simple observation, this preaching must be done *before* it is needed. The preacher must inoculate his listeners, preparing them for the day of evil. All last fall, the news was filled with reports documenting the efforts of the Centers for Disease Control, Homeland Security, and the Department of Defense to develop the vaccine for the H1N1 ("Swine") flu virus and prepare for a possible outbreak. The plan included the vaccination, or inoculation, of targeted populations that are especially vulnerable. The vaccine is only good if administered before the victim contracts the flu. Even so, preaching on the attributes of God, his sovereignty, and his providence needs to occur before it is needed. Despite the false promises and distorted hope offered by proponents of the prosperity gospel, the fact is that all God's people are vulnerable to the difficulties of life. Jesus told his disciples, "In the world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33; cf. Acts 14:22). Indeed, if becoming a Christian provided immunity from the cares of life, our churches would be packed and we could permanently retire our evangelism committees.

Carson writes:

One of the major causes of devastating grief and confusion among Christians is that our expectations are false. We do not give the subject of evil and suffering the thought it deserves until we ourselves are confronted with tragedy. If by that point our beliefs—not well thought out but deeply ingrained—are largely out of step with the God who has disclosed himself in the Bible and supremely in Jesus, then the pain from the personal tragedy may be multiplied many times over as we begin to question the very foundations of our faith.¹²

The preacher who waits until tragedy occurs will find he has wasted precious time that could have been spent fortifying the beliefs and trust of those whose faith is now on trial. The preacher who preaches faithfully in the "normal situation" and is prepared for the "abnormal events" that require wisdom and agility, will do well to prepare his people by teaching them that suffering is part of the Christian's calling (2 Corinthians 1:5-7), that suffering is not to be compared with "the glory that is to

¹² Ibid.

be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18), that suffering, ultimately, is “according to God’s will” (I Peter 4:19). The vaccine will do its job, but only when used properly.

The Bottom Line

A couple of months ago, On Army Reserve duty, I sat in two airports as both of my flights were delayed, delayed again, and delayed even further. The weather over Atlanta was angry and Air Traffic Control grounded many inbound flights until the thunderheads exhausted their wrath. After an hour and a half delay at the Greenville-Spartanburg Airport, we were cleared to fly. I made it Atlanta—only to find that my outbound flight was also delayed (and delayed again and again)! As I waited at the gate, I watched frustrated travelers rushing through the terminal as they tried to make connecting flights. I listened as standby passengers negotiated, cajoled, and finally pleaded with Delta agents to miracle them a plane seat. All around me there was disappointment, frustration, and anger. Oddly enough, I was relatively calm—which is not my normal response to such situations. I did have nearly a three-hour margin between flights, so I confess that it is easy to be holy when you have a long lay-over! But there was something else at work. Thinking about this topic forced me to rehearse some of my most basic beliefs and attempt to express them with clarity. Whether I achieved that goal or not—you can decide.

However, this much I can say with certainty. My recent reflections on God’s goodness, sovereignty, and providence provided fresh reminders that none of the frenetic activity around me occurred apart from the powerful, loving, and kind disposition of my heavenly father. And then one more thought came to mind. I wondered how many of the frantic multitude surrounding me in Terminal B of the Hartsfield-Jackson Airport had that same confidence. Some of those travelers were soldiers returning to war. Others, businessmen and women, were rushing off in desperate search of the deal that might keep their businesses alive. Many travelers were saying goodbye to family members who lived a good distance, perhaps even an ocean away. Some would fly off to face new troubles before the day, week, or month is past. Almost all will remain forever nameless to me, but some will have their new troubles played out on the nightly news. How many of these dear people, rushing to and fro with the many burdens of life, had heard a sermon, any time in recent memory, that inoculated them for both the normal situations of life—and the abnormal events they inevitably will face?

Calvin Miller tells a story that reminds preachers of their calling:
Pain comes in all types and sizes. . . . A preacher that I much admire wrote of a time when his daughter was very ill with a condition that would soon take her life. He confessed that these were very dark days for his family and that during her illness he never went to church casually to hear the casual preaching of a casual parson. He went to church desperately because his

needs were desperate. Most of the time he heard three-point sermons filled with lots of information about the Bible. But what he really wanted was not more biblical information but a pastor who would bleed with him. . . . Sermons are not placebos prescribed to make people feel good. But they are a stab at kingdom togetherness, and they are a balm for the broken. Audience analysis reaches its heights when something like 9/11 happens. For one brief, shining moment, sermons all weep from church to church nationwide. We have no answer for the great pain, but not to offer the hurting a God-word is sermonic shame.¹³

Indeed. We who preach do not have magic solutions to the cares of life, but we do have the one perspective, the one angle of vision that gives hope in both the normal and abnormal situations of life and shows the way forward in faith.

In Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, the Lady Galadriel bestowed a great gift on Frodo, the Ring-Bearer. She gave him a small, glittering Crystal Phial (Vial) which emitted a bright light, and said: "It will shine still brighter when night is about you. May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out." Fellow preachers, this coming Sunday you will have listeners sitting before you, hoping to hear a word from God. For someone, this Sunday may be a special occasion; for someone, the gloom of night has descended and there is desperate need for light in that dark place! Be confident! You have the living Word of the living God which "is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." You have *the one true light* that shines in dark places when all other lights have gone out. (2 Peter 1:19; cf. Psalm 36:9, 119:105).

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¹³ Miller, p. 54.