



Imagining a Sermon

RICHARD LISCHER

Duke University Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina

The phase of sermon preparation that preachers find most excruciating and for which they find themselves least prepared is the one seminaries don't teach and, many would say, cannot teach. Exegesis, with its many criticisms, is standard equipment for students and pastors, and many are conversant with the sophisticated hermeneutical theories of Bultmann, Ebeling, Fuchs, Gadamer, and Ricoeur. Sermon design has always been the mainstay of homiletics, with new patterns and forms for sermons emerging with some regularity. Even the delivery of sermons, nurtured by the rhetorical arts of memory and elocution, though rarely taught, is believed to be teachable and learnable. But the role of the imagination in preaching eludes us. Like most teachers of preaching, I have prepared a list of activities that students should check off on the way toward the Sunday sermon. The list begins and ends in prayer and touches on most everything in between, from establishing the text to expunging split infinitives. But, like the question of the place of the Holy Spirit in preaching, where on this list does one insert the imagination? Dare we speak of exegesis and even hermeneutics as technical proficiencies to which must be added the charism of the imagination as it manifests itself in a clever sermon illustration or an inspirational verse? I want to argue in this article that the imagination is at work at every stage of sermon preparation and, later, try to sketch some of the specific operations of the imagination in preaching.

I. THE THEOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Notice the title, "Imagining a Sermon," is a gerund rather than a substantive noun. This is to indicate that imagination is an activity and not a compartment of the brain, nor a physical image impressed upon the brain in perception. Imagination is an activity of thinking as that thinking is influenced by the realities of living and the exigencies of communication. It always involves a crossover from one realm of life to another or from one world of discourse to another, so that one dimension is seen in terms of another and with such clarity as to possess a revelatory quality. But to have said this is already to have strayed into the language of theology, for the one-in-another principle pervades all religious communication, including the Christian: "If I have told you earthly things and

you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" (John 3:12) is representative of the Christian mind-set but is alien to those who seek a clearer illumination of the thing itself without reference to other realities.

Before pursuing this principle of analogy, let me defend the association of theology and

imagination. This is not to imply that theists carry a sixth sense, a third eye, or any other special equipment that makes them more imaginative or creative than others. Indeed, when it comes to preaching, the opposite may be true on theological grounds. Theological imagination belongs to all whose art or communication is infused by or reflective of the divine spirit. Theopoiesis, as Amos Wilder names it, is characteristic of those who create out of a sense of the immanence and the transcendence of God, for whom the act of creation is both a partnership with God and an interminable quest after him. The theological imagination is greater than the sum of individual believers who acknowledge God when thinking creatively. It is a legacy from Plato and Paul to western thinking and is embedded in the persistently religious imagination of the modern and postmodern age.

When we come to the exercise of the imagination in Christian preaching, the picture becomes more focused. Here we discover specific occasions for liberation as well as constraints and responsibilities. For the Christian imagination, if we may call it that, is not only concerned with a divine being but with the particularities of Israel and the Bible, the mystery of Jesus, the foolishness of the cross, with the arena of the church, the character of the poet (preacher), and the needs of an audience (congregation). Under such conditions it becomes more difficult to speak of Christian *poesis* in a way that would satisfy Shelley or Pound. Wilder reminds us that the New Testament is common in its language. He calls it not *Hochliteratur* but *Kleinliteratur*, a kind of folk art.¹ Since much of the New Testament is a testimony or sermon about Jesus, preaching that is faithful to the New Testament will also be a folk art, something for the people. The notion of art for art's sake is as foreign to preaching as it is to the New Testament. Homiletics should be nervous about putting on airs as an art form and hobnobbing with drama, literature, poetry, dance, or autobiography. These exercises of the imagination are born in the freedom of the human spirit and elaborate their own expressive forms. The only constraints they obey are formal. Preaching, on the other hand, is as indifferent to form as the New Testament, both abounding with a mixed multitude of forms, but the *matter* of Christian proclamation is so welded to Jesus Christ that a neutral observer might mistake preaching for ideology.

II. IMAGINATION'S THREEFOLD ROLE

Preaching is an exercise of the imagination, in that the gospel is faith seeking expression. The truest and most effective preaching does not separate the message from its form, but asks, What is it about this facet of the gospel that necessitates this particular form of expression? In the whole process of prepara-

¹Amos N. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1971) 28.

tion, the role of the imagination is threefold, that of the historical-literary imagination, the hermeneutical imagination, and the homiletical imagination.

Historical-literary Imagination. The preacher's use of imagination does not begin by establishing the reality of God. It begins with the witness to that reality in the Bible. Scripture is basecamp for the preacher because it is the Word of God. Because the Bible is a document of another age and people, it does not freely dispense its treasures without historical and literary prying. It may be well and good to ask how Abraham must have felt when he set off for the Promised Land, but it also helps to know the location of Ur, the literary form of the covenant,

and the relation of the Abraham story to the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Similarly, Paul's controversy with the Corinthians has a deeper meaning to one who knows something of gnosticism. Mark's theology of the cross makes more sense to one acquainted with the predicament of his addressees, etc., etc. Of course, the first stage in historical-literary study is to know as much as possible about the situation, audience, purpose, shape, and function of the biblical text. The evidence is usually not unambiguous, and the preacher does not have the student's luxury of listing and footnoting options without making choices. The point is, often the scholarly choice is something other than a weighing of Bultmann versus Dodd versus Jeremias versus Brown, but rather the result of a theologically informed intuition, perhaps an intuition sparked by the preacher's imagination of how the text might have been preached.

A historical and literary study of the Parable of the Marriage Feast in Matthew 22:1-14 will yield more than moralistic admonitions about excuse-making and a perfunctory mention of the puzzling tag-end parable of the man without a garment. Certainly the preacher wants to know the *Heilsgeschichte* as well as the recent local history that lies behind Matthew's version of the parable. The interpreter also wants to see how Matthew's theological purpose differs from Luke's, and how allegory differs from true parable. But the interpreter also wants to appreciate the literary and dramatic quality of the parable. The preacher may retell the story by casting it into acts leading to the climactic appearance of the king in a silent and stunned banquet hall. If the preacher knows how parable as a genre works, he or she will not be too hasty to make a theological point of the final few verses. Not only the reversal, but the inexplicable and perverse reversal of expectations, is a feature of other parables, e.g., the parables of Kafka. In Kafka such a parable is an exemplar of an alien and lost world whose inhabitants are penalized for wanting what they can't have. In retelling the biblical story will the preacher's words and tone betray anything of the bafflement of the modern world? If not, the preacher has missed something in the story itself.

The second, most common—and most abused—stage of the historical imagination is the preacher's imaginary flight into the first century. True historical imagination, which often entails hard choices on soft data, is exchanged for a game of Let's Pretend. Let's pretend we are with Peter in the courtyard or with Mary in the garden. Imagine that Jesus has invited *you* to walk on the water with him. The trouble with this approach is at least threefold: First, it skips historical and literary study and moves directly to psychologizing or spiritualizing of texts. Second, it is exceedingly hard for even the most devout Christians to imagine that they are first-century Palestinians. Too much has

come in between! Third, effective preaching does not bus twentieth-century Christians into the first century, but enables the events of long ago to live again in a new and different setting. Proclamation always looks ahead.

Historical imagination is necessary because no document can say everything necessary about an event. And what is presented is not so much a photograph as it is a lush and colorful impressionistic painting. The historical imagination does indeed relive the events recorded in the Scripture, but not in the psychological game alluded to above nor in the sense that R. G. Collingwood suggests, namely, in the mind of the individual historian. Preaching emerges from a matrix of liturgy and tradition in which the sacred events are being relived, interpreted, and

transmitted from one generation to the next. The corporateness of the historical imagination leads to a discussion of hermeneutics.

Hermeneutical Imagination. The most distinctive element in the Christian imagination is the necessary role of hermeneutics in it. Just as Hermes was the messenger of the gods, the imagination is the mediating activity that links and confronts different orders of reality, worlds of experience, and modes of discourse. Ray Hart compares the imagination to canal locks capable of joining two different levels of water.² This linkage is the whole mission of the gospel and therefore necessitates the hermeneutical imagination. The hermeneut's basecamp is the Bible; the destination is the experience of the contemporary listener. But how to make the trip without playing games of Let's Pretend or using other devices that either leave the preacher mired in the land of the Jebusites or the congregation adrift in current affairs? The first mistake merely repeats what the Bible says; the second replaces what the Bible says with other stuff.

The resolution of the dilemma depends on an understanding of the thing investigated. For the great Romantic theorists of the imagination, Wordsworth and Coleridge, the world was not an object on which the poet impressed his personality. The world was already alive and coming out to meet the poet. Likewise the Bible is no inert object under investigation. If it is a basecamp, as we have said, it is one that sends out messages to us the messengers. Or, to change the image, the Bible is "oratorical" (Northrop Frye); it "wants" to address others and be heard. When the preacher opens the Bible, he or she encounters the living God and a community that includes the interpreter.

Thus hermeneutics encompasses more than the rules for interpreting Bible passages. It seeks understanding, which is the translation—not the repetition nor the replacement—of the biblical message in an idiom appropriate to the deepest levels of contemporary experience. Not long ago I asked my daughter what she knew about Anne Frank. She said she knew what she read of her *Diary*. "Well then," I asked, "do you feel that you understand her?" "Yes," she replied. "You mean you understand what it is to be a Jewish girl in Europe during the time of Hitler?" My daughter was embarrassed to go on with the dialogue, for she knew that she did not in fact *understand* in any way commensurate with the terror and the pathos experienced by Anne Frank. She knew that to understand means more than to have grasped an explanation. But instinctive-

²Ray L. Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) 323.

ly she had claimed "understanding" because, despite the vast differences in the girls, there were similarities: both teenagers, both lovers of books, and both mature beyond their years. It is the hermeneutical imagination's business to sort through the points of contact and the divergencies and, where possible, to see how the biblical text is at work in this world.

Hermeneutics and rhetoric work together, for the rhetorical shape of the sermon depends on the hermeneutical insight. The sermon finds its climax when the intent of the gospel is unfolded with the utmost intensity and clarity in terms of the hearer's situation in life. The Word works again. I think that is what Joseph Sittler means when he defines imagination as "the process by which there is reenacted in the reader the salvatory immediacy of the Word of God as this Word is witnessed to by the speaker."³

Hermeneutics seeks to exegete both the text and the destination of the text. In the latter case, this means the several worlds of the preacher. There is the big world of national and global

events, the little world of the parish and local community, and the preacher's own world, his or her own heart. Faulkner once said, "The only thing worth writing about is the human heart in conflict with itself." This is too narrow a subject for the preacher but not too narrow a field. Certainly the congregation deserves more than the first-person, "How-I-felt-when-I-read-this-text" genre of a sermon, but the gospel is intended for the human heart, and the first available heart for testing is the preacher's own. The hermeneutical imagination, then, at this stage of the sermon's development, imagines an audience. It is an audience of human hearts just like the preacher's, but also an audience through which all the hope and suffering of the world are present.

Homiletical Imagination. Coleridge made the distinction between the fancy and the imagination. The former is the juxtaposition of unlikely entities; the latter is a fusion or reconciliation of unlike qualities. Too much preaching corresponds to fancy—propositions sandwiched between stories and illustrations crammed into the sermon not because they help unfold the burden of the text, but merely to add some color or human interest.

We have already considered the need for historical imagination as opposed to simple repetition of Bible texts or lengthy and learned "backgrounds" for congregations. It was Fosdick who reminded us that only the preacher comes to church with a burning interest in the Jebusites. The other leg of the hermeneutical arch is anchored in the real world. But the real world doesn't yield sermonic material any more readily than the world of the Bible. Many preachers believe that merely by mentioning the real world they have made the message relevant and even imaginative. "Newspaper preaching," for example, documents the biblical teaching on sin and evil by reeling off a list of current hotspots on the planet: Northern Ireland, South Africa, Afghanistan, Lebanon; or: hunger, drugs, unemployment, sex. "Television preaching," to take another example, relates the gospel not to real life but to life as it is falsified on situation comedies and soap operas, as though the whole congregation should participate in the inanities of this make-believe life. The homiletical

³Joseph Sittler, *The Ecology of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961) 56.

imagination does not content itself with the crude imprinting of images on the unsuspecting brains of people subjected to tabloids, Harlequin Romances, and sitcoms. Indeed, this is the older and mechanistic view of the imagination—the imprinting of images on a passive brain. Just as parents admonish children, "Why don't you turn off the T.V. and use your imagination," so the preacher will try to overcome his or her own passivity to world events and stimuli and resurrect the active, creative, synthesizing imagination—the homiletical imagination. When parents say "Use your imagination," they mean for the child to comb its experience and memory as a base from which to fabricate new roles and relations in the world. Moreover, if I am not reading too much into parental exasperation, I think they mean for the child to use its observation of the world as both a source and a test for new forms of play. Young preachers sometimes mistakenly think that if they have not had certain experiences, they can't legitimately speak about them from the pulpit. But this is to understand the imagination in literalistic and passive terms as an image imprinted by a specific experience, whereas the homiletical imagination aggressively synthesizes scriptural image, theological truth, memory, experience, and general knowledge.

The homiletical link between the Bible and raw stuff of contemporary experience is

metaphor. It effects the reconciliation Coleridge sought by fusing text and experience at a new and higher level of unity. One ingredient in metaphor is imitation. Preaching should be realistic enough to effect what Fred Craddock calls “the nod of recognition.” “Yes,” says the hearer, “I can take part in this sermon without having to suspend my humanity.” The imitation may be generic rather than photographic, as Aristotle might have said it today. That is, it need not describe “the thing that has happened but a kind of thing that might happen” (*Poetics*, 9). In tragedy, he continues, the audience is moved with pity not merely by the suffering of another person, but by the undeserved misfortune of *one like ourselves* (13). Nothing is neutral in the sermon, neither biblical background nor current allusion, but all has import as it is accessible to and apprehensible by people like ourselves.

The second ingredient in metaphor is contrast. “How like a podium is this pulpit” is a bit too imitative to be effective. But “how like a prow is this pulpit” captures physical and functional likeness in two very different objects. When Flannery O’Connor stuns the reader with this figure: “The Sun was a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood...,” she is not “describing” a sunset, but integrating nature and grace at an imaginative level.⁴ It goes without saying that preachers cannot literalistically borrow such metaphors from the artist, but they can observe the artist’s way of interpreting the continuities and discontinuities in the world.

C. H. Dodd’s definition of parable is justly famous: It is “a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”⁵ What Dodd says about a literary form

⁴“A Temple of the Holy Ghost” in *Three by Flannery O’Connor* (New York: New American Library, 1953) 194.

⁵C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (rev. ed.; New York: Scribner’s, 1961) 5.

might with modification be applied to the homiletical imagination itself. What is most arresting to hearers of a sermon is not its exotic imagery or farfetched stories, nor the finality with which it nails down familiar points. What is arresting is the “vividness or strangeness” of the gospel in human vesture. No one knew this and implemented it better than Luther. The watchword for his colorful and imaginative use of narrative, for example, was not the distance of the otherworldly but the depth of the truly human.⁶ He knew that the homiletical imagination has no other task than to pronounce the gospel of God in language most expressive of the deepest yet most common realities of human life. Metaphor is the life’s work of the preacher for two reasons: God became a man, and God is not a man. Likeness and contrast: one thing embedded in another and yet only heretically and idolatrously identified with the other—this is the theological theater of the Christian imagination. If the pulpit can get all that right, no one in the churches will mistake the imagination for mere fancies.

III. SLOGGING IT OUT

But how does the imagination *work* in sermon preparation and delivery? It is difficult to say. Many who live by their imaginations, including preachers, tend to throw up a romantic fog around their acts of creation. Coleridge was a notorious liar about his own creative energies that went into the production of *Kubla Khan*. Many preachers, too, may be rational in their work

descriptions until it comes to sermon preparation. Then it is a matter of each man (and it usually *is* a man) going to the Jabbok alone to wrestle with his angel. This sort of heroic nonsense not only robs the congregation of its role in sermon preparation, but it perpetuates a misunderstanding of preaching itself. Too many congregations have the idea that the preacher gets sermons from a few inspirational, mountain-top experiences during the week. They consequently fail to appreciate the bone-crushing work involved in the researching and formulation of the sermon.

The imagination is hard work. Perhaps that is the most sobering thing to be said about imagining a sermon. D. N. Perkins in his book, *The Mind's Best Work*, makes the same point and along the way dispels several myths about the imagination. One is the myth of Still Waters that pictures critical imaginative leaps as occurring in the subconscious or during extended periods of incubation. Although it may be true that some problems need to be put aside and returned to at a later time, their solution occurs as a result of mental engagement, not disengagement. A second myth is the Blitzkrieg theory of the imagination. Perkins' studies indicate that while insight does not actually occur in incubation, neither does it happen in a flash or in any way that shortcircuits the normal processes of reasoning.⁷ The fluency that is so often associated with artistic creativity and great preaching is usually more apparent than real. In most cases fluency in the creative process is inferred from the fluency of the product, in our

⁶See Richard Lischer, "Luther and Contemporary Preaching: Narrative and Anthropology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36 (December 1983) 487-501.

⁷D. N. Perkins, *The Mind's Best Work* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1981) 49-66, 164-169.

case, the natural and dynamic qualities of the sermon. The most important component of the imagination is what Perkins calls teleology by which he means nothing other than purpose. They are more likely to succeed who have committed themselves to the cause. Those who have grasped the intent of the gospel and devote themselves to its communication will accomplish their task—not by special processes but special purpose. The artistic triumph, scientific breakthrough, or brilliant sermon is the result of arduous preparation. As Pasteur said, "Chance favors the prepared mind."⁸ In this respect, the preacher must slog it out with the poets, scientists, and all others who by the exercise of the imagination are driven toward things unseen.

⁸Ibid., 100-101.

