The Witness of Preaching

THIRD EDITION

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Preface to the Third Edition

When I wrote the first edition of *The Witness of Preaching* in the late 1980s, I was trying to do both something old and something new. The "old thing" was to create yet another basic textbook on Christian preaching, both as an introductory resource for beginning students and as a refresher for more experienced preachers. Since at least the fifth century and the appearance of the homiletical portion of Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*, every generation in the church has produced manuals of instruction on preaching, and *Witness* was simply one more entry in this very long line. Hundreds of basic textbooks preceded this one, and a good number of new ones have appeared since this book was first published. What sets *Witness* apart from the others is that I have tried to allow the theological image of bearing witness to the gospel to govern and organize every aspect of the process of creating a sermon from beginning to end—from the interpretation of a biblical text to the oral delivery of the sermon.

The "new thing" was to create a textbook that was in direct conversation with other voices and opinions in the field of preaching. For much of its history, the discipline of homiletics was viewed, like the other so-called practical fields, as *applied* theology. What this meant was that "real" theology was acquired in the systematics class or in Bible courses, and preaching class was consumed with the process of learning the pragmatic skills and techniques needed to apply this theology, already worked out elsewhere, in the form of sermons. Thus, most homiletics textbooks were manuals written by master preachers who shared secret recipes, techniques, and nuts-and-bolts wisdom about their methods for fashioning effective sermons. These books were often very sage and helpful, but they were for the most part quite

self-contained and largely unaware of other voices and other views. They said, in effect, "Here is how I do it. Imitate me."

As the first edition of this book was being written, however, a sea change was taking place in the understanding of practical theology, including homiletics. Instead of thinking of practical theology as merely applied theology, practical theology was beginning to emerge as a generative theological discipline in its own right. The actual lived experience of faithful people—as individuals, in churches and other communities, through their religious rituals and practices, and in their engagement with society—was increasingly being seen as a *source* for theological knowledge and not just as a *target*, the place toward which one shot doctrinal arrows sharpened somewhere else. We began to recognize that the ways the church preached over its history, as well as the ways it celebrated the Lord's Supper or showed hospitality to the stranger, were not just applied theology; they *were* theology—lived theology, theology in action, theology embedded in practice. So, practical theologians, instead of simply packaging and retailing formal theology for the mass market or giving helps and hints for surefire results in the church, now understood themselves to be directing traffic in the middle of a busy three-way intersection, with knowledge coursing back and forth among dogmatics, the practices of the church, and "secular" disciplines, each with its claims and effects on the other.

One of the results of this redefinition of practical theology was that homiletics began gradually to develop a highly creative and theoretically sophisticated literature. By the late 1980s, homiletics had many lively disciplinary and interdisciplinary conversations going, with a host of scholars engaging the debate, and we had moved well beyond the point where another "here is my method" cookbook would be sufficient. We needed, I felt, a textbook that acknowledged there is a field of homiletics out there to be reckoned with and one that explicitly put the reader in the middle of the game on the field. Readers of a basic text in preaching should know where an author stands on the homiletical map, of course, but they should also become aware that there is, in fact, a map, a wide territory full of contrasting opinions and important options. Books like that in homiletics were not unheard of, but they were rare enough and recent enough to merit being called "new," and creating a basic textbook in this genre was the "new thing" I tried to accomplish in *Witness.*

By the time that the second edition of *Witness* appeared in 2005, a decade-and-a-half after the first, many fresh issues and voices had entered the homiletical arena, and that edition constituted an attempt to catch up with the field, to address some of those new forces and factors, to reflect the current state of the homiletical conversation, and to introduce not only the best methods for preaching but also the sort of theological thinking needed to do good preaching. The homiletical party had gotten more crowded, more interesting, and a good bit louder, and the second edition attempted to capture some of that excitement.

Now, another decade has gone by, and the rate of change in the field of homiletics has not abated. But perhaps the greatest shift reflected in this edition of *Witness* is in the context of preaching. In North America, seemingly unshakable understandings of the church are now being deeply shaken. Many congregational membership rolls have dramatically declined, numerous church buildings have been abandoned, and the Sunday assemblies in many places look noticeably greyer and smaller. Will Herberg's mid-twentieth-century classic *Protestant—Catholic—Jew* described a religious establishment that is now shattered, and the voice of Christian witness today takes place amid a global marketplace of religious expressions and traditions. Preachers still hold forth in old country churches and neo-Gothic sanctuaries, but they are almost as likely to be found in taverns and movie theaters, storefronts and living rooms. Experiments in church life and structure abound, and preaching is a part of this inventive ethos.

Some might well say that, in the midst of all of this change, diversity, and experimentation, the time for preaching textbooks has passed. No single vision of preaching can possibly speak, it could be argued, to the dazzling array of today's Christian communities. This third edition of *Witness* stands as a wager that this is not the case. But the wager depends not on advancing some totalizing vision of preaching borrowed from an earlier day but rather on discerning the essential practices of Christian preaching that still shimmer in the diversity of expressions. Whether Christian worship occurs in a Puritan-style meeting house, a retrofitted warehouse, or a borrowed hookah bar, and whatever that worship may look like, eventually the hunger for the Word will emerge. And then someone must speak that Word, which means that someone must listen closely to hear the testimony of ancient

Scripture and then to seek to find the language and the forms needed to allow this testimony to find a new hearing. These are the essentials of preaching that nimble preachers must labor to enact in settings ever new.

So, this new edition of *Witness* remains, in a basic way, what it was from the beginning: not a manual for preaching in a church established and at rest but instead a guidebook for a church always on safari or, to employ a biblical allusion, for a church that, like Abraham, has set out not knowing where we are going. I have attempted to keep this volume relatively brief, simple, and uncluttered by peripheral squabbles and secondary concerns—in short, something that can be figuratively carried in a backpack. I hope this book will help nimble preachers prepare more faithful sermons, even when those sermons are preached in surprising places and to listeners who are perhaps only loosely tethered to the Christian faith. But my most fervent prayer is that this book will encourage preachers to become self-critical about their preaching so that wherever the Spirit may take them and the community of faith, they can become their own teachers and remain faithful to their call to bear witness to the gospel.

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Introduction

Because I am a teacher and not currently the pastor of a congregation, most of the preaching I do these days is as a "guest preacher." Guest preachers, because they are, well, guests, unfamiliar with the local customs, are almost inevitably given an elaborate list of instructions before the service begins. Sit here, stand there, be sure to turn on your microphone, use one of the band's music stands for your notes, say "trespasses" instead of "debts" in the Lord's Prayer, go to this door—that sort of thing. Especially when we are preaching in an older, more traditional building, one of the most important pieces of information we guest preachers receive, curiously enough, is a set of directions for entering the place of worship. Getting into the pulpit may seem like a simple matter, but church floor plans are notoriously complex, and a wrong turn can easily send an embarrassed visitor into the choir loft or a broom closet instead of the chancel.

Finding the Entrance

How a preacher enters the place of worship is not just a practical matter; it is a theological issue. Look closely for a moment at how this actually happens in various settings. In some churches, the minister appears, almost unnoticed, through a side door during the playing of the prelude, unobtrusively moving to a seat near the pulpit. In other churches, the minister joins the choir in a processional down the aisle during the opening hymn. In churches built to resemble theaters or music halls, the preacher emerges, almost magically, from the darkened wings at the preaching moment. In still others, the entrance

of the clergy is a moment of high ceremony, marked by prayers and hymns. Notice, however, that in every one of these cases the clergy come from somewhere *outside*; the preacher comes from somewhere else into the place where the congregation waits.

Logistically, this makes sense, since ministers typically spend the last few minutes before the service in the study fiddling with their sermon notes, or in the sacristy pulling on vestments, or pacing around trying to memorize how the projected images supporting the sermon will be woven into the spoken word, or in the music room meeting for prayer with the choir, or in the hallway being tugged on the sleeve by someone who wants a quick word with the pastor. Theologically, though, another picture appears. Regardless of where the worship leaders emerge physically and architecturally, theologically it is crucial to remember that we come from within the community of faith and not to it from the outside. Whether we use this door or that one, process down the center aisle or modestly glide to our chairs, it is not nearly as important as remembering that, even though we will now be the leaders of worship, we have come to this task from the midst of the community of faith and not from the outside.

If we were putting this theological conviction into strict practice, worship leaders would not enter from outside the place of worship at all. We would come from the pew to the pulpit, from the nave to our place in the chancel, from the middle of the congregation to the place of leadership. For most church settings it may seem somewhat far-fetched to imagine a minister rising from a pew to give the call to worship or to preach the sermon, but this is precisely the picture of the Christian church at worship portrayed by Jürgen Moltmann in *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*:

> [W]e can take our bearings from the simple, visible procedure: the community gathers to hear the proclamation, or for a baptism, for the common meal, for the feast and to talk together. Then one person or more gets up in front of the congregation in order to preach the Gospel, to baptize, to prepare the meal, to arrange the feast, and to make his contribution to the discussion. These people come from the community but come forward in front of it and act in Christ's name. It is not they as "office bearers" who "confront" the congregation; it is Christ. What they

> do and say is in the name of the triune God. How, then, are we to understand the position of these people with their particular charges or assignments? They come from God's people, stand up in front of God's people and act in God's name.[1]

What is at stake here is not a liturgical quarrel over the mechanics of how worship leaders get into place. Local circumstance, architecture, and tradition will always dictate that. What is at stake is the more urgent matter of how worship leaders, including preachers, *understand* themselves and their leadership roles in relationship to the whole community of faith. This is a book about preaching, and we will soon turn our attention to that particular ministry and to the many tasks involved in creating sermons. It would be a mistake, however, to jump immediately into that undertaking, as if sermons had no context and preachers had no community.

Preachers come to the pulpit from *somewhere*, and unless we can name that place, we risk misunderstanding who we are and what we are supposed to be doing. When we who preach enter the place of worship and find a congregation waiting there for us, it is easy to forget that we come from these people, not to them from the outside. We are not visitors from clergy-land, strangers from an unknown land, ambassadors from seminary-land, or even, as much as we may cherish the thought, prophets from a wilderness land. We are members of the body of Christ, participants in the worshiping assembly, commissioned to preach by the very people to whom we are about to speak.

From the *Pew* to the *Pulpit*

Whether we realize it or not, most of us who preach act out in our own ways this business of coming to the pulpit from the pew, from the midst of the congregation's life. Regardless of how we physically navigate those last few steps into the pulpit, dynamically we come fresh from engagements with the community of faith. We may have spent the previous hour in prayer for ourselves and for the others who will worship, or with a blue pencil, still trying to find just the right sermon words for these people on this day. We may have attended an educational class or taught one, gathered with a small group, listened with care to a person in distress or been listened to ourselves, met with the church leaders as

they prayed and then made a decision about the budget, drunk a cup of coffee with some people in the fellowship hall, been given a last-minute announcement about the pancake breakfast, or heard the choir or musical group rehearse. Whether we have been praying, talking, teaching, preparing, or listening, we have been immersed in the lives of these people to whom we will speak, which is another way of saying that, symbolically at least, we rise to the pulpit from the pew.

Moreover, we have been involved with these people, in ministry to and with them, throughout the week, in hospital rooms and living rooms, in town halls and school auditoriums, in kitchens and factories. Perhaps our work has strengthened the faith of others; perhaps we have found our own faith strengthened. Even if we do not do so literally, we stand up to preach from our place in the middle of this community's life, not from a point above it or at its edge. Moltmann has it right; preachers "come from God's people."

Preachers "come from God's people" in another and more basic sense as well. Those who preach are baptized Christians. Because preachers are people who have been baptized into Christ, they are *members* of Christ's body, the church, before they are its *leaders.* Sometimes we tend to think of "the call to preach" as a rather isolated event that happens to a few select persons. The finger of God somehow falls upon the chosen ones, summoning them to preach and sending them into pulpits. Some preachers have indeed had dramatic experiences of personal calling, but it is simply misleading to speak of the preacher's call apart from God's calling of the church as a whole. "What matters," writes Moltmann, "is that public preaching and the preacher should not be isolated from the simple, everyday and matter-of-course language of the congregation's faith, the language used by Christians in the world."[2]

The fact that the sermon, the proclamation of the Word, is a central event in worship echoes the fact that proclamation is a central activity of God's people. The sermon in worship stands, as it were, at the epicenter of the speech acts of Christians in the world. When a congregation takes a public stand for humane treatment of prisoners, insisting that they, too, are children of God, the entire church is preaching the gospel. When a church school teacher tells the stories of Jesus to children, the gospel is proclaimed. When a congregation opens its fellowship hall on winter nights as a shelter and provides hospitality for the homeless,

it bears witness to the gospel. When, in the name of Christ, members of the congregation bring words of comfort and encouragement to the sick and those in prison, pray for and with those in distress, and welcome the stranger, they announce the good news of the kingdom. God calls the whole church to proclaim the gospel, and every disciple of Jesus Christ is a part of this calling. The whole church proclaims the gospel, and the preaching of sermons is but one part of this larger ministry. So when a preacher stands in the pulpit, reads the Scripture, and preaches the sermon, this act of speaking the gospel ripples out into the world as the church continues to speak in a thousand places and ways.

Those who preach not only participate in the church's common ministry, they are also shaped by it. Years ago, seminaries were sometimes jokingly called "preacher factories," and the assumption still lingers that the task of theological schools is to take people and fabricate them into ministers. This is not the case at all. Ministers are not "made" in seminaries. Seminaries and other programs of theological education *train* ministers; ministers are made in and through the *church*. Women and men may for a season engage in formal theological education to gain deeper knowledge of the Christian story, but they were first taught that story and they are sustained in that story by Christian people in the church. They come to schools to wrestle with the great theological ideas, but it is the church's theological heritage they will encounter. They come to places of theological training to acquire the skills of guiding, teaching, counseling, and speaking, but they come because the church, in some way, has already discerned in them gifts for leadership. They leave seminaries not to create the church but to take their places of service in its ongoing ministry. People do not stand up to preach because they needed a job and have answered a want ad on a website, but because the church prayerfully set them apart for this ministry. They have been entrusted with a ministry that does not belong to them but that belongs to Christ and is given to the whole church.

A *Lonely* Place

Despite this brave talk about the ministry of preaching belonging to the whole church, every honest preacher knows something of the loneliness of the pulpit too. As Moltmann's picture implies, we who preach get up from our place in the midst of the congregation, and then we walk to the

pulpit and stand in front of the people. There is a distance between *us* and *them*, and often we feel this distance keenly. We want to speak the gospel to them, the gospel of grace and demand, and yet we sometimes stand there looking out at people who could hardly seem less receptive. Because we come from them, we know them, know their apathies and divisions, know their broken places and their dull ears—which are, of course, ours, too. We stand there and look out at the man who is even now cheating on his wife, the parents who are pressuring their children into lives of frenzied overachieving, the couple who just purchased a new home to escape an integrated neighborhood, the single mom who just lost her job and is deeply frightened for herself and her children, and the merchant who recently pulled a fast one on the Internal Revenue Service. As we stand there, we see the restless teenagers in the back playing with their phones and texting to each other, the church leader who is doing her best to undermine our ministry, and the man who is already asleep, and the place where we stand feels like a lonely place.

Part of this feeling comes because we allow our theology of the church to grow slack. We know better, of course, but it is always tempting to hold the gritty reality of the church up against some romantic image of the community of faith, vibrating in perfect pitch with the music of the Spirit. We adjust our carefully prepared sermon notes, clear our throats to begin, look up at the odd assortment of people out there who dare to call themselves a congregation, and wonder, "Can this be the church of Jesus Christ?" A realistic theology of the church must always begin with the frank acknowledgment that, as Craig Dykstra has claimed, "A basic reality of congregational life is that we are engaged in socially acceptable (indeed, socially celebrated) patterns of mutual self-destruction."[3] Dykstra goes on to say:

> Furthermore, the mere presence of the story, vision, and language of the faith is no guarantee that these powerful patterns *will* be overcome. The patterns easily survive in congregational life, no matter how much that life may be filled with talk about sin, crucifixion, the love of God, or the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.[4]

This is where our theology of the church must begin, but it is not where it may end because there is more to the story. It is true that the

church is tarnished by the same failings that stain every human organization, but congregations continue to say and do things that point to another truth about themselves, namely, that what is most important about their life does not spring from within but from God who calls the church into being. Worship, as Dykstra has observed, is the central event by which the church points beyond itself to God. "In worship," he states, "the congregation is a congregation. Through worship, patterns of mutual self-destruction become redemptively transformed."[5]

What does it look like for a congregation to point beyond its own institutional life in worship? One place we find this happening is in prayers of confession. These prayers may seem at first to be rather unremarkable features of the liturgy, but they are quite remarkable indeed when we contrast them to the rituals of the rest of society. Lofty words are spoken at the dedication of a civic center or a country club, but no one confesses sin. Prayers uttered before football games and corporate banquets are devoid of confession. In Christian churches every week, though, people say in one form or another, "We have erred and strayed from Thy ways like lost sheep. . . . O Lord, have mercy upon us." Week after week Christian people repeat words like these, and by them they celebrate the freedom that belongs to those who know that what is truly good in human life does not finally depend upon our capacity to manufacture it.

One can also discern a congregation pointing beyond itself as they share the bread and wine at the Lord's Table, as they gather to witness the marriages, as they sing songs of the resurrection at graveside, and as they pray for the needs of people all over the world. By doing so, they confess that they belong to a fellowship larger and deeper than their own making, greater even than their own desires. They testify that they have been made brothers and sisters to people they might otherwise pass by with a shrug of indifference. Through the words of worship, they are beckoned to speak, however haltingly, the language of a world that transcends self-interest and self-reliance; and even their children, just learning the rhythms of this language, begin to sense the difference between "When you wish upon a star" and "Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep."

The fact that the church in its worship points to, hopes for, and expects the reality of God beyond itself is the reason that William Willimon has insisted that the church, in its worship, retreats *to* the real

world and not *from* it. "This is the 'function' of the delightfully non-functional world of Sunday worship," he writes, "*to withdraw to the real world where we are given eyes to see and ears to hear the advent of a Kingdom that the world has taught us to regard as only fantasy.*"[6]

This is also the reason that the preacher rises from the midst of the assembled people and then stands in front of those people to preach. The preacher comes from God's people and thus is not outside the people or above them. But the preacher stands in front of the people because what the preacher is about to do is not of the people's own making or, despite all the work of sermon preparation, of the preacher's own making. As Moltmann puts it, "It comes from their God, in whose name they speak and act. After all, the commissioned and commissioning community does not want to listen to itself and project its own image of itself; it wants to hear Christ's voice, celebrate his fellowship, and have the assurance of his commission."[7]

So there we stand, we who somehow find ourselves in the pulpit with the commission to preach. We know, now, from where we have come, and it is from the congregation of Christ's people, both faithful and faithless, of which we are a part. They have taught us the "old, old gospel story" and have sent us now to this place to tell it anew to them; to recount its cherished word of hope; to remind them, because they have often forgotten, of its power; to call them, because they are prone to resist its claim, to take on once again its yoke, which is easy, and its burden, which is light; to comfort them, because they are frightened and doubting, with its unfailing grace; and to reassure them that, no matter how far they have strayed from home, it is still, and ever will be, the story of God with and for them.

A Sense of *Mystery*, a Sense of Humor

No discerning person can stand in this place in front of the community of Christ without a deep sense of awe and responsibility. It is also true that no one should stand in this place without a deep sense of humility and a healthy sense of humor. We come to the place of preaching, we have been insisting, from the congregation, and we share their faith, but we also share their failings. We have no more right to be in the pulpit than anyone else in the congregation; indeed, we have no "right" to be there at all. As fully as anyone present, we have our doubts and our

patterns of disobedience about the very gospel we are to proclaim. It is good to be there in the pulpit, but we are not there because we are good. That the group of people from which we come could be called the body of Christ, and that we, of all people, could stand before them to preach the gospel in Christ's name, is humbling and, in its own way, humorous. As Karl Barth once remarked concerning those who speak of God:

> We can and must act as those who know. But we must not claim to be those who know. . . . [The power of God's self-revelation] consists in the divine act of majesty in face of which those who really know will always find and confess that they do not know. The attitude of those who know in this power can only be one of the greatest humility. . . . It is just because they can have no doubt as to the liberation which is quite outside their own control that those who are really free to know this matter can never lose a sense of humor in relation to themselves.[8]

"Never lose a sense of humor about yourself." Perhaps that line ought to be engraved on a plaque and placed on the back of the pulpit alongside the traditional quotation from the Gospel of John, "We would see Jesus." The verse from John would remind us to take the task of preaching the gospel of Christ seriously; the phrase about a sense of humor would encourage us not to take ourselves too seriously while we are doing that task. Moreover, a sense of humor in worship is not only a sign of humility but also of the gospel's liberating power. "With Easter," states Moltmann, "the laughter of the redeemed . . . begins."[9] Because God in Christ has broken the power of sin and death, Christian congregations and their preachers are free to laugh at themselves, and they can also laugh at the empty gods of pride and greed. They can mock hell and dance on the grave of death and sin.

When I was a child, my family worshiped in a small clapboard church set in the red-clay farming land of rural Georgia. We were a congregation of simple folk, farmers and schoolteachers mainly, and our ministers led worship wearing inexpensive and ill-fitting dark suits, believing that robes were a too-fancy sign of ostentation. The heavy summer heat of that region settled in at sunrise and gathered intensity through the day, so that Sunday worship in the hot months

was punctuated by the waving of funeral-home fans and the swatting of gnats. All the windows of the church, and the main doors as well, were opened wide to accept whatever merciful breezes might blow our way. On some Sundays, however, it was not a draft that blew in the church door but a neighborhood dog, a stray hound of indecipherable lineage who somehow found our service irresistible. He was not there every Sunday by any means, but his summer appearances were frequent enough that some joked he had a better attendance record at worship than many of the officers.

The ushers knew better than to try to run him off, the one and only attempt at that having driven him bounding toward the pulpit. So, while we sang the hymns, the cur would sniff curiously at the ankles of the worshipers. Deacons would step around him on their way to take up the offering, and during the pastoral prayer the dog would wander aimlessly around the room. He was an endless source of mirth for us children, and he occasionally served as a handy and spontaneous sermon illustration in such references as “no more sense of right and wrong than that dog over there.”

Looking back on it now, I realize what a trial it must have been for our ministers to attempt to lead worship and to preach on those Sundays when this mongrel was scampering around the building and nuzzling the feet of the congregation. I confess I do not covet the experience for myself, but there was something wonderful about those times as well. Whatever else it may mean, a dog loose in worship unmasks all pretense and undermines false dignity. It was clear to us all that the grace and the joy and power present in our communion, and these were present in abundance, were not of our own making. We were, after all, people of little worldly standing who could not keep even our most solemn moments free of stray dogs. I want to believe that even our dark-suited, serious-faced ministers were aware of the poetic connection between a congregation of simple farmers and teachers in their Sunday best with a hound absurdly loose in their midst and a gathering of frail human beings astonishingly saved by the grace of God, grace they did not control but could only receive as a gift. If so, then in some deep and silent place within them they were surely taken with rich and cleansing laughter—and if they were, they were better preachers of the gospel for it.