

# Encountering Jesus

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# Encountering Jesus in Preaching

What is so often lost in our effort to preach is the role of the congregation in the preaching task. In so many instances the preacher sees it as a solo performance. Part of this has to do with an understanding of preaching as the *primary* task of the pastor.

What I am proposing is the model of the preaching congregation as a means of facilitating an encounter with Jesus through the sermon. Such a model can help develop a vital and faithful congregation.

While the importance of proclaiming the Word cannot be neglected, nay, must not be—"lest the rocks cry out!"—preaching is the cooperative effort of the pulpit and the pew. What P. T. Forsyth suggested long ago is still a word to us all: "The one great preacher in history is the church. And the first business of the individual preacher is to enable the church to preach."<sup>1</sup>

I shall never forget the year 1959. That was the year I was graduated from seminary. That was also the year I

realized a life-long dream—to become the pastor of a local church.

When I arrived at Hamilton Park United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas, with seminary degree in hand, I was excited and anxious about many things. I was most particularly excited about the task of preaching. To be sure, I had learned in seminary that *all* of the functions of ministry were important for effective and competent ministry. And I believed that. But I had also learned from my experience in the black church that the first thing the black congregation asks about its pastor is, Can the reverend tell the story?

Indeed, this emphasis upon preaching was further reinforced in my very being by the oft-repeated admonition of some of my preaching elders who said, "If preaching is not your main business, then you have no business preaching."

Now I am certain that the congregation and the preaching elders in this particular tradition did not disparage the need for the pastor to be competent and proficient in the other functions of ministry. But their stated emphasis led me to believe that if I did not demonstrate *immediate* effectiveness in preaching, I would not be around long enough to demonstrate my competence in the other functions of ministry.

Later on in my ministry I became the district superintendent of a predominantly white district. And, after meeting with numerous pastor-parish relations committees, I learned that effective preaching is a major concern of most congregations. This was further underscored with lay committees during my years with the Perkins School of Theology school intern program.

In the meantime, back at Hamilton Park in 1959, I began my preaching ministry with an understanding of preaching that led me to believe that it was a *solo performance* by the pastor. This understanding was augmented by a parish situation that suggested that I do much of my work alone. I did not have to consult with other staff members. I *was* the staff! Most of my congregation worked during the day, so I had very limited contact with them, except during evening hours and weekends. Even in those congregations where staff and congregation are available, there are ministerial duties that are usually done alone (such as hospital calls, study time, and acts of administration). So I accommodated to a style of ministry in which I was often alone.

I began to understand why the ministry is often depicted as a lonely profession. Sometimes lay people set us apart and keep us isolated. But often this is our own doing. Too often we try to carry the whole burden of ministry by ourselves. We forget that the ministry belongs to the whole church. We forget that to be baptized in the church is to be called into the ministry of the church.

On Mondays when I started the process of sermon preparation I asked the perennial question that is asked by most preachers: "On what shall I preach next Sunday?" At that time I was out of touch with the "exegesis" of this question that is provided in an article by Thomas Troeger, then professor of preaching at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School. He says:

First, it assumes that only "I" am preaching. Second, the form of the verb, "preach on," suggests that a

sermon is a pronouncement on some topic. The preacher will speak on love in the same way the president speaks on the economy or a teacher lectures on history. Finally, the questions relate the sermon to only one point in time, Sunday. Thus the question implies that preaching is the act of a solitary self speaking on an isolated topic at a singular point in time. There is no hint that the Word that needs to be spoken may already be circulating in the listeners' lives.<sup>2</sup>

As I look back on my sermons from that period I find that they included much abstract language, very few concrete examples, and had a tone of explanation rather than invitation to have an encounter with Jesus. I revealed more about Barth, Tillich, Niebuhr, and Bultmann than I did about either myself or the Savior. To be honest, I did not want to reveal much of myself to my congregation for fear my congregation would discern that I, too, was just as human as they were and standing in the same need.

I also discovered that my sermons of that period were undergirded by an approach to the Bible that Justo and Catherine Gonzalez characterize as a "Lone Ranger Bible Study Syndrome."<sup>3</sup> In this approach there is an excessive emphasis upon private Bible study to the neglect of corporate or group study. And even when the value of both forms of Bible study are acknowledged, the Lone Ranger Syndrome dictates that private study is somehow better or deeper or more meaningful.

My biblical exegesis failed to take into account that "most of the Bible was written to be read, not in private, but in public, often within the context of corporate worship."<sup>4</sup> According to the Gonzalezes, the Lone

Ranger did not roam the West alone. He had Tonto with him. But in spite of this, the hero was called "lone" because his Indian companion (who repeatedly saved his life) simply did not count.

They note that "this (also) happens when our biblical interpretation fails to be challenged by others, either because they share our own perspective, or because, since they differ from us, we classify them as 'Tontos' whose perspectives we need not take into account."<sup>5</sup>

In my early years of preaching and Bible study, lay people were my "Tontos." They repeatedly saved my life, but I did not listen to them, for at this time they did not count in the preaching process. Also, my preaching particularly suffered during these years because it was undergirded by an understanding of *practical theology* that emphasized the application of doctrine *to* life rather than the discovery of doctrine *in* life.

During my first year at Hamilton Park, I considered myself to be the authority on all matters of doctrine and life. After all, I had earned a degree from Perkins School of Theology! I had the vital information, and it was my responsibility to provide it for the less fortunate and deprived members of my congregation. Thus I understood my task as preacher to apply matters of doctrine and life to those who were unaware of such issues. Unintentionally, I was using a "banking concept" of education that has been coined by Paulo Friere. That concept says that the teacher has all the information, which is *deposited* in the student's mind, the receptacle. The student is expected to receive the information as given and feed it back to the teacher who gives a premium grade to that which comes back unaltered.

I had a banking concept of preaching. I was *unprepared* to accept the fact that, in so many instances, the members of my congregation knew much more about doctrine and life than I knew. But the longer I was there, the more I came to the realization that I was not telling them what they did not know. Instead, I was only identifying something that God had already done through them. They may not have been able to articulate it in the terms that I used, but they knew it to be true in their own life experiences. An example of this was related by one of my students in a sermon he preached at Perkins. He told of the experience of a young, "turned-on" seminary student who went out to practice his profession. He was determined to find somebody and tell them everything they needed to know about God. He selected as his target area a run-down tenement neighborhood (where else?), and he walked until he found an old man sitting on the curb—a rather rugged-looking individual.

When the young man saw him he said to himself: "Well, if anybody looks like they need to know something about God, this fella does." So the young, "turned-on" seminary student went up to the old man, placed his hand on his shoulder, and said, "Old man, let me tell you about God."

The younger man paused to see how the old man was going to respond. After a long reflective pause, the old man responded with a story. This is the story he told: My grandfather was a freed-man. But somehow he managed to get hold of a piece of land and build a home

on it. My father inherited the land and worked it, but one year our crop was not too good . . . and when the depression came I left home to make it easier for my folks. . . . I survived wandering around . . . selling whatever I could get my hands on. . . . For a while I was drinking real heavy. . . . I got married but it didn't last. . . . I had been in jail more times than I can count. . . . A few days ago they kicked me out of my apartment . . . couldn't pay the rent . . . ain't got nowhere to go . . . folks died about thirty years ago . . . I ain't sure where my brothers and sisters are.

After hearing this, the young man put his hand back on the old man's shoulder and said, "Old man, sounds like you sure need to know about God." The old man raised an eyebrow at him and said: "Young man, what I've been trying to tell you is, I know about God! Who do you think helped me to last this long? How do you think I could have survived without knowing God? Had it not been for the grace of God, I couldn't have made it."

After many similar "discoveries" on my part in the life of the congregation I finally got the point: our task is not to introduce the Word, but to expose the Word that is already there. In the words of Dietrich Ritschl:

Speaking and hearing belong together, so that there can be no preacher who has not heard the Word and no hearer who can remain silent. Since it is not possible to be a hearer in privacy without the [fellowship] of believers, it must be the intention of all preachers to belong to a circle of members of the church with whom the Word is heard before it is preached. There is no

direct route from the privacy of the study to the pulpit. . . . The office of proclamation belongs to the whole church and not just the preacher.<sup>6</sup>

On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit was given not to isolated individuals, but to a worshipping community that faced the world of need together. Therefore, regardless of the preaching tradition in which it is delivered, the faithful sermon is always a mutual undertaking between pulpit and pew.

### The Preaching Congregation

The cooperative effort of preaching sometimes involved a preaching congregation and a listening preacher. Henry Mitchell says it well when he writes:

Preaching cannot be the private province of an elite priesthood, even though that professional body must do much to make the word/experience worthy of the title Gospel. Persons learn and grow because of involvement far better than they do from detachment and inert attention. Ritual and other forms of dialogue offer much in this vein toward the recovery of preaching.<sup>7</sup>

Reuel Howe makes a similar point about the general ministry of the church, including the preaching ministry. He asserts,

The theology of ministry implicit in the kind of preaching in which the preacher is solely responsible contradicts the doctrine of ministry that we profess. We profess that all ministries are the ministry of the

Church, and since the Church is made up of clergy and laity, it follows that both have responsibilities in all ministries, and this is no less true for preaching.<sup>8</sup>

It follows that if the pastor is to truly become the preaching pastor, he or she must first of all become the listening pastor to hear what the preaching congregation has to say. Now, unfortunately, the art of listening is one that has almost disappeared in our noisy and busy day. Someone has said that ours is the "Age of the Unfinished Sentence." Usually when we are engaged in conversation, we are so eager to make our comments or insert our opinions that as soon as the next person pauses for breath we leap in as if we are driven by some kind of compulsive vocal disease! I imagine that when we master the art of speaking while inhaling, conversation will cease altogether! I have a friend who says that God evidently intended for us to do twice as much listening as we do talking because we were given two ears but only one mouth!

But there *are* times when the listening of the preacher is more important than the preacher's talking. As a listener, the preacher becomes aware to what extent the congregation is a witnessing community with a story to tell and, therefore, a preaching congregation. When properly encouraged and employed, the resources of members of the congregation can be a lift to the preacher rather than a put-down.

I recall hearing the late Bishop Paul Martin tell of the time when he received a new church appointment early in his ministry. The congregation planned a reception for him on his first Sunday. During the reception everyone came around to greet him except for one man who

lingered in the rear of the room. After everyone else had greeted him, this man came forward and simply stood there. The future bishop asked him, "What do you do here?" The layman said, "I look for the preacher's weaknesses." And he added, "I'm good at it! But when I find them, that's where I get beneath him, and then I lift him up."

Now, there are several vital and important areas in which the preaching congregation shares a witness that can give a lift to preaching in the church today.

First, the preaching congregations help to uplift the preaching of the preacher *before* the sermon is preached if the preacher will view the congregation "not as an audience but as the Community through whose life the sermon has been born."<sup>9</sup>

For example, I found this approach to preaching to be extremely uplifting in the development of the funeral sermon. I recall that during the early years of my preaching, I had great difficulty preaching funeral sermons. This was created in part by my own uneasiness regarding the issue of death, but it was also caused by the fact that often I felt that in order to be effective I had to remove myself from the family of the deceased to some silent sanctuary. There I engaged in a solo flight and eventually landed upon what I considered to be some appropriate and relevant word. Almost always I was never satisfied with the results. Then one day I was invited by a dear saint, along with her family, to share her funeral plans prior to her death. As she and her family members shared their favorite scriptures, hymns, and faith experiences, a powerful and appropriate



sermon idea came alive that was liberating, comforting, and faith-affirming.

Through such a sharing process of sermon development, I became more comfortable, relevant, and faithful with the funeral sermon. Also, it is my experience that the process increases, rather than decreases, the authority of the pulpit, because the sermon is supported and reinforced by the witness and experience of the preaching congregation, as represented by the family members.

A variation on this process of sermon development is the piano player in cult churches who picks up the melody according to the key of the singing congregation, thus reversing the practice in the mainline churches where the instrument first gives the key, and the singers follow. A careful listening to the melody of the preaching congregation, as well as the melody of the biblical Word, assures that preaching is done in the right way.

Some years ago, according to John D. Godsey, Karl Barth observed that “any Christian who wishes to live responsibly must read two things: the Bible and the daily newspaper—and never the one without the other!”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the responsible preacher listens to two texts: the biblical text and the contextual or situational text, which includes, of course, the preaching congregation.

Sandy Ray, the late great preaching pastor of the Cornerstone Baptist Church of Brooklyn, New York, compared the preparation of sermons to the wife who goes to the supermarket for good nutrition, and she also has her own imagination. But she always has her family in mind. They determine what she selects. So likewise, he suggests, that preachers are shopping all the

time—and if we are to touch home base we must keep the interests and needs of our congregations in mind.

A classical biblical example of how the preaching congregation helps to uplift the preaching of the congregation is the experience of the prophet Ezekiel. His congregation was a congregation that was languishing in captivity. Describing his relationship with them, Ezekiel says: “I came to the exiles at Tel-a-bib, who lived by the river Chebar. And I sat there among them, stunned, for seven days” (Ezekiel 3:15). Commenting on this passage, Henry Mitchell shares the following insights, which support the value of the preaching congregation:

During the vision early in his ministry, one gets the feeling that people were busy tuning Ezekiel out—that nobody was listening. But then there is the twenty-third chapter, after Ezekiel began to really sit where they sat, the report is that people said, “Come and listen. Come and hear; this man has something to say that matches our needs. Come and hear this man; he has something to say that relates to us, that we can understand, something that will help us.”<sup>11</sup>

Because Ezekiel engaged in a dialogic process that attuned him to the witness of his congregation, he was able to communicate both an appropriate and relevant Word.

Ezekiel’s experience also illustrates the fact that the biblical prophet was never a “visiting fireman.” Instead, the prophets always arose out of their own communities and were nourished by their self-understanding and witness. Likewise, the witness of our congregations can

provide rich nourishment to the preaching task *before* the sermon is preached.

Second, the preaching congregation can help uplift the preaching of the preacher *after* the sermon has been proclaimed in the worship service. For example, the congregation can function as a helpful evaluation-feedback mechanism to the minister. When used properly, such a feedback mechanism can lead the preacher forward to increased effectiveness in the pulpit. In reality, preachers have no choice of whether or not to employ the congregation as an evaluation feedback mechanism. They are constantly being evaluated and offered feedback, whether it is solicited or not. The preacher only has the choice of getting evaluation formally and structured or informally and unstructured.

I know one preacher who says that he gets informal evaluation feedback from an elderly woman as she shakes his hand at the conclusion of every service. He says he has done well if she says, "Reverend, you fed my soul so well I'll have food to last all week long." But he says that when he has not done so well she says, "Reverend, I'll be praying for you all week long."

There are many other informal ways in which the congregation preaches back to the preacher *after* the word has been proclaimed in the worship service. Sometimes it is delayed feedback that may come long after the sermon is proclaimed. Some time ago, I preached a revival in El Paso, Texas. After the first sermon, I was greeted at the door by a man whom I had not seen in ten years. Seeing his wife was not with him, I inquired about her. He informed me that she had chosen to worship at another church. I told him to tell her that I

would like to see her before I left town. She responded to my message and was present in the services that evening. At the conclusion of the service, she joyfully expressed surprise that I inquired about her and wanted to see her. She then proceeded to tell me that she had not planned to attend any of the services because she was *turned off* by something she understood me to say in a sermon some ten years ago! I was grateful for the evaluation-feedback, though long delayed. It helped us to resolve an issue of faith and action. But I regret that no evaluation-feedback, informal or otherwise, enabled us to deal with the issue sooner.

It is for this reason and others that many preachers are becoming more intentional in soliciting ways to hear the congregation preach-back *after* the sermon has been proclaimed. Some preachers have organized formal talk-back sessions at various times during the week. Early in my ministry I took advantage of a Sunday evening Bible class I taught to get evaluation-feedback on my morning sermons. We usually spent the first few minutes discussing the sermon. I have found the dialogue to be a challenging and growing experience for both the listening preacher and the preaching congregation.

Also, I have learned not to let my members get by with the casual "I-enjoyed-your-sermon-this-morning" comment. More often than not I now respond by asking: "What specifically did you like about it?" For those who dare to ask the question, it is a good way to hear the congregation preach after the sermon has been proclaimed in the worship service.

In addition to evaluation-feedback, the preaching congregation also shares responsibility for the continued



care and delivery of the sermon *after* worship—when it becomes incarnate in their lives. Thomas Troeger tells of a visitor to the studio of Henry Moore, the famous sculptor. Inquiring about a particular piece of work, the visitor asked Moore, “Is this finished?” Moore replied, “None of my work is finished until it is seen and responded to.”<sup>12</sup>

So it is with sermons. They are not finished unless they become *incarnate* in the lives of the preaching congregation, which proclaims them in the life of the world. In some sense, we ought to ask the question: Is my preaching portable? Is it repeatable? Can it walk as well as it can talk?

But the more serious test of the sermon is: Did the congregation (and that includes the preacher) encounter Jesus in some way in the proclamation of the gospel? Sometimes we encounter Jesus as the transforming Christ who changes our lives and makes us new creatures, and we say “Yes!” to what God has done for us. Sometimes we encounter Jesus as a healer, a comforter, a friend who heals our brokenness and gives support and guidance for coping with life’s demands and wounds. Sometimes we encounter Jesus as the Christ who calls us to vital piety and urges and enables us to move from one degree of grace to another—providing the grace for daily triumphs of grace: “grace upon grace.” In the words of the old spiritual, “every round goes higher and higher.” Sometimes we encounter him as the Ancient Prophet of Galilee who steps across the centuries still urging and demanding that we seek justice, feed the hungry, find a home that is really home and not merely a shelter for the homeless, give comfort to people with AIDS, and help those who are

addicted to drugs, and create a world where there is bread with dignity, peace with justice, liberation with power, and life with wholeness. But always we encounter him as the Presence and the Challenge amidst our pride and glory and our noisy assembly, the Christ of God whose “name is above every name,” and at whose name every knee shall bow and every tongue confess him as the King of glory!

Third, the preaching congregation can help uplift the preaching of the preacher *during* the worship service. For me, this is best understood, illustrated, and experienced in the black preaching tradition. While this is not the only way, and I have been in congregations where there is clearly a dialogic experience in preaching, it is my best example. However, I have been amazed and surprised and rewarded in so many places—in Annual Conferences across the church, in convocations, and in local churches—where this has happened. Indeed it has made me feel it is possible for any congregation. In fact, when preaching in predominantly white congregations, I often begin by saying, “Let the church say Amen!” The congregation always responds with a verbal amen! One white pastor told me he continued the practice after I left. To his pleasant surprise, his congregation is providing some verbal feedback during the sermon.

But my best example is still the black church and its unique way of responding to the preached Word and the response of the people *during* the sermon. It is characterized by a preaching style that is based upon a

pattern of call and response which is deeply rooted and nourished in our African tradition.

The authentic black worship service is a genuine dialogical event in which everyone in the congregation is affirmed and elicited as an important and critical part of the sermon proclamation. While some preachers in other traditions may deliver their sermons as though their congregations do not exist or are not a vitally necessary part of the communication event, for the most part, this practice would seriously damage the effectiveness of the preacher in the black church.

Sandy Ray once told of a conversation he had after a spirited worship service with an attorney who was a member of his congregation. The attorney said: "Reverend Ray, I enjoy your preaching, but those people down front keep up so much noise that I can't hear what you are saying." Sandy Ray replied: "If they weren't keeping up that much noise down front, I wouldn't be saying anything *worth* hearing!"

In the call and response pattern, the black preacher solicits on-the-spot "feedback" and "feed-forward" by asking such questions as "Have I got a witness?" "Are you listening?" "Isn't that right?" or "Are you praying with me?" The congregation responds, "Yes, sir!" "Yes, ma'am!" "Go ahead!" "Come on up!" "Say it!" "A-men!" and "Tell it like it is!"

Above all, the authentic congregation, through the power of the Holy Spirit, functions as a *supportive fellowship* that uses all of its resources to hold the preacher up and keep him or her from failing. I had to learn this the hard way on the occasion of my very first sermon. I was a student in seminary, and I was doing my

field work with Dr. I. B. Loud at St. Paul Church. One Sunday morning as we were all standing to sing the hymn of preparation, Dr. Loud turned to me and said: "Okay, son, it's yours this morning!" I was terrified. I had never preached a sermon in my life!

I do not remember how I got to the pulpit, but the Holy Spirit must have gotten me there. I was taking a course in homiletics, and I suddenly remembered that I had started writing a Lenten sermon on the experience of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Talking about identifying with Jesus, I had no problem whatsoever! I repeated those words of Jesus when he said: "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me!" But God, being God, just as God was with Jesus, refused to move the cup!

So I started out preaching, haunted by the fact that I had not written a conclusion to the sermon. Well, I got as far as I had written and my mind went blank! I just stood there! Talk about "leaning on the everlasting arms." I was leaning on the arms, shoulders, and chest of the Lord. And then it happened. A little old lady stood and said: "He'p him, Jesus!" Then another dear saint of the church said, "Yes, Lord!" Next I heard a male voice from the choir loft saying, "Come, Holy Spirit!" People in the congregation began to moan. Little children sitting on the front pew began to clap their hands. And all of a sudden the entire congregation rose to their feet with shouts of praise and thanksgiving. Through the prompting of the Holy Spirit that preaching congregation provided the conclusion to my sermon. I did not have to say another word. I simply turned around, walked to my seat, and sat down.

Now I think I understand what Søren Kierkegaard meant when he said:

Many people go to church as they would go to a theatre, expecting to hear a performance by the minister, and to judge how well he does. But in reality, . . . the roles are quite different. In church it is the hearer who is on stage, under the spotlight. The preacher is the prompter who is just off the scene, whispering the lines to the players. If they forget their parts, he is there to remind them. The hearer, out on the stage, is supposed to catch the prompter's lines and work them into his act. The audience who is watching the players and the prompter, and judging how well they do their parts, is Almighty God.<sup>13</sup>

Paul reminds us that "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." However, I am convinced that if we earnestly desire to become listening preachers before a preaching congregation, helping our congregations to encounter Jesus, to see an injured Mother's or Father's face, to experience the God fact, to give a lift to those who have grown weary in the long journey, God's Holy Spirit will bless our efforts and use us for the sake of the proclamation of the gospel. We shall then see the assembly of a vital and faithful congregation gathered around the word that is the Word. For this Jesus we preach is in fact the Christ, and the Christ himself is *the* Word!