

Introduction: At the Crossroads

When I was twelve, my family and I took a white-water rafting trip down the Roaring Fork River of Colorado. Not content to simply ride along, we opted for the more adventurous route of paddling ourselves. This meant we straddled the pontoon of the raft with one leg inside and one leg dipped into the icy waters of the river. My older sister and I shared the front positions on the raft, and because the first mile or so of the river was fairly gentle, I was lulled into thinking my light straddle of the raft—kind of like the way you would straddle a horse for a trail ride—was adequate. Then we hit a genuine stretch of rapids, and the first wash of the white water swept me into the freezing river.

I started to panic as my breath was ripped away by the ice-cold water. But then I remembered our guide's instructions. I bobbed up out of the river and twisted myself around so that my feet and legs were as close to the surface as possible, a position the raft guides accurately described as "rump bumping."

By the time I had cleared the rapids, I'd been swept a considerable distance out in front of the raft and my family. As the water slowed slightly, I swam to the shore, climbed out, and tried to walk alongside the river, hoping to catch sight of the group. But the shore soon became a steep embankment as the river churned ahead into a gulley and the water's speed picked up once more. So I climbed up the embankment and found myself in the middle of a large swath of rolling green pasture. "Excellent," I thought. "I can walk above the white water until we're out of the ravine, and I'll have a great view of the river the whole time." It was the first bit of luck since I'd been swept overboard.

My enthusiasm quickly ebbed after a few hundred yards, though, as I crested one of those beautiful rolling hills and came across a bull. Actually, it was not just a bull, but a huge black bull like nothing I'd ever seen outside of a movie. And it was standing right in the middle of my path. Though that day was a good thirty-five years ago, I remember keenly the realization that I'd come to a crossroads. I could either try to sneak past the bull as it contentedly chewed on the grass or else backtrack, slide down the embankment, and reenter the cold white water. Knowing next to nothing about what makes a bull take interest in someone, I chose the latter and hurried back into the river.

THE ~~PROBLEM~~ MYSTERY OF PREACHING

Sometimes when we reach a crossroads, it's obvious. Maybe it's because we're at an actual crossing of two paths, each marked clearly. Or maybe the either-or quality of the situation is obvious, as it was when I encountered the bull. In both cases, we know where we are, and the decision we have to make is clear.

Sometimes, however, we know we reach a crossroads only well after we've made the decision and chosen a route—accepting this particular congregational call, for instance, or ending a relationship, or starting a family. Even when the decision in front of us is significant, we may not realize how completely it will alter our future.

And sometimes we suspect we're at a crossroads but can't tell for sure. We may feel the pressure that comes with making a momentous decision, yet be unable to identify exactly what juncture we've come to or the options we are called to decide between. We sense there's no going back but can't quite trace the path that brought us here, so we have a hard time deciphering what “back” and “forward” even mean.

More and more preachers I talk to fall into this last category. They feel that all kinds of things are changing, but they can't quite put their finger on precisely what. They feel they are less effective than they once were, but they aren't sure why. They know they received good training at seminary, and often have been going back for continuing education regularly, yet have lost confidence that they know what they're doing. And most pernicious of all, even when they preach a “really good sermon” (you know, the kind that gets way more than average “Good sermon, Pastor” comments), they're not sure it's what the congregation really needs anymore.

Sometimes, even when a sense of the decision in front of us becomes fairly concrete (use PowerPoint, for instance, or abandon the lectionary in favor of sermon series), we may feel as if the choices themselves are only symptoms of something much larger. As one pastor I spoke with put it, the options she is regularly offered for enlivening her preaching too often feel like gimmicks, rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic* while the ship continues to take on water.

I've been preaching now for nearly twenty-five years and teaching preaching for a little more than half that time, and the refrain I've heard from preachers from across Christian traditions and from every generation is the same: preaching is broken. This is usually followed by an earnest plea: fix it!

And for more than a decade, I've tried to do so in the classroom and the pulpit, at conferences, lectures, and workshops. Of late, however, the conclusion I've reached is that preaching *can't* be fixed. Not because I've given

up on preaching, mind you, but rather because I've become deeply suspicious of the analysis and the corresponding request. Let me try to explain.

My suspicion has two sources. The first is my familiarity with the literature on preaching. Since at least the 1960s, you see, homileticians have been responding to the charge that preaching is broken by coming up with a variety of fixes. The catalogue of diagnosed problems and prescribed solutions is almost endless:

- *Problem:* Preaching is too much like a dull university lecture to engage audiences that have grown up in the entertainment age. *Solution:* Move from didactic and deductive styles to narrative, inductive forms of preaching.
- *Problem:* Preaching isn't trusted as a form of communication in an era that is suspicious of authority. *Solution:* Move out of the pulpit, involve people in your preparation, and take up an egalitarian style and tone.
- *Problem:* Preaching offers too much information in an age already swimming in data. *Solution:* Abandon information, and instead strive to cultivate an experience through the preaching event.
- *Problem:* Preachers can't compete with the likes of David Letterman or Jimmy Fallon. *Solution:* Abandon the manuscript, and adopt a more conversational style of preaching.
- *Problem:* Preaching itself seems dated in an age where the image is everything. *Solution:* Put up a screen, and incorporate slides and movie clips into your sermon.

And the list goes on.

At this point, I should be clear: It's not that there haven't been a number of helpful analyses of the challenges preachers face or a host of creative responses. I've incorporated many of these suggestions into my own preaching. Yet the problems with preaching persist.

Perhaps, I've begun to wonder, that's because of the very nature of preaching. If we are called to proclaim good news that is not just old news or the daily news but regularly surprises and even arrests our hearers, then perhaps preachers should not be surprised by the inherent and unending challenge of doing that. As theologian Joseph Sittler asserted a half century ago, "Of course preaching is in trouble. Whence did we ever manufacture the assumption that it was ever to be in anything but trouble" if it is to be relevant to a changing world and faithful to the troubling gospel of Jesus Christ?¹ Preaching, that is, if

it is faithful to the gospel, will always be somewhat broken as it seeks to give fit testimony to the one broken upon the cross.

I have a hunch, though, that there's also something more going on. If my only suspicion of requests to fix preaching were that preaching will always be somewhat broken, I would be content with the ongoing stream of homiletical resources currently available. Indeed, I would be eager to add to them, hoping to address the particular concern I've identified and provide a helpful angle of vision and recommendation.

But I don't think that's what's needed at this point, which brings me to my second area of concern about the decades-old pattern of identifying and analyzing the broken element of preaching and proposing a fix. This problem-solution analysis, I've come to believe, underestimates the scope and depth of the changes we've been experiencing and therefore fundamentally refuses to call into question the essential practice of preaching itself. As long as we're trying to "fix" preaching, that is, we've already concluded that the basic practice and patterns of preaching we've employed in recent decades—and, truth be told, for centuries—are essentially sound. They don't need to be redefined, only revised. And I'm just not sure that's the case anymore.

Let me try to get at this from another angle by borrowing the helpful distinction sometimes made between a problem and a mystery. A *problem*, according to this point of view, is a challenge or need that has a recognized context, involves set limits and variables, and presents itself for solution. Typically, the key task in solving problems is amassing more information and, based on careful analysis of that information, making changes at the level of technique or practice. We are, I believe, by evolutionary disposition and professional training born problem solvers. This is regularly an immensely helpful trait, as there are all kinds of important problems in desperate need of solution. But because we are best equipped to solve problems, we often reduce *everything* to a problem to be solved, and then we proceed in appropriate fashion.²

Sometimes, however, the context is no longer recognizable, so we don't know the limits and variables involved. In short, sometimes the rules of the very game we are playing change, and in this situation, more information not only doesn't help us but may actually confuse us by inducing us to operate by the

1. Joseph Sittler, *The Anguish of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966; Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2008), 14.

2. See, for instance, Malcom Gladwell's essay, "Enron, Intelligence, and the the Perils of Too Much Information," in *What the Dog Saw and Other Adventures* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2009), esp. 153–55.

rules of the old context rather than take seriously the foreign terrain in which we find ourselves. These types of challenges are better termed *mysteries*. And as much as we theological types love the *idea* of mystery, we—like just about everyone else—find the actual condition of living in mystery to be challenging.

Why? Because mysteries, other than the whodunit type, can't be solved. Rather, mysteries can only be embraced. They don't require more information, but rather a curious mind, a willingness to suspend past assumptions and judgments in order to be surprised by what manifests itself in this new context and world. That is what makes mysteries so vexing: to the degree that we are wed to past practices that succeeded in a different context, a mystery makes us feel either frustrated or incompetent—and all too often a bit of both.

That's why I'm suspicious of the pattern of homiletical research that treats preaching as a problem to be fixed. I increasingly think what confronts us is not a problem but a mystery. The context in which we live, move, and have our being in ministry has changed so significantly that I suspect we don't really know what will work to promote a lively engagement with the Christian faith today. That doesn't rule out having our hunches and trying out some new practices. But these efforts are, we should admit, experiments, for we don't yet know what kind of preaching will best serve us in equipping Christians to live in a post-Christian world. Why? Because Christians haven't operated in a world like this for more than fifteen hundred years!

For this reason, I firmly believe that our call at this juncture is not to solve the problems of our church but instead to embrace the mystery of the world in which we find ourselves, trusting that if we do so with open and courageous hearts, appropriate ways of being and acting—including the act of preaching—will present themselves. So if the task of fashioning a homiletic appropriate to our age eludes us at present, perhaps that's because we haven't yet sufficiently embraced the mysterious new world in which we live and to which we are called to preach. Our dreams of continuing on the high road and navigating familiar if also challenging green pastures is no longer available to us. Instead, we need to slide down the muddy banks of this curious world and clamber back into the cold water to see where the brisk cultural currents will take us.

Actually, that's not quite right. It's not that treading the familiar path is unavailable, but rather that it also entails significant risk. Perhaps the risk isn't as great as getting gored by a big black bull, but then again, perhaps in other ways, it may be even greater. For if we continue to embrace patterns of preaching designed and suited for a bygone age, then we probably shouldn't be surprised if the new age in which we live continues to pass us by. The choice is before us.

We are at a crossroads—one where not only the outcome is unclear, but also the primary challenge and perhaps even the alternatives. We can either continue adapting and refining established techniques or be willing to call into question our fundamental practices by leaning into and listening carefully to the world in front of us.

QUESTIONS OF THE AGE

This book is an attempt to choose the route of leaning in and listening. It does so by giving attention to three dominant ways of describing the changes that have shaped and continue to influence our culture and world over the last half century: postmodernism, secularism, and pluralism. My guess is that we all have at least a passing familiarity with these terms and wouldn't dispute that they are central elements of our current culture and world. But getting a handle on the challenges they present is another matter altogether. It's one thing to say we live in a postmodern world, but it's another to allow that knowledge to shape our preaching so as to respond to this postmodern world.

To help us embrace and respond to these three dimensions of our time, I want to hearken back to an observation made by Paul Tillich. Tillich once divided world history into three distinct phases based on the dominant question of the age. For the ancient world, Tillich argued, the question was one of life and death: How does one escape the finality of death to enjoy life eternal? In the Middle Ages, the question changed to one of guilt and forgiveness: Given original sin, how do we find a merciful God who will overlook our guilt and offer us forgiveness? In the modern era, in which and for which Tillich wrote, the conversation had moved to existential questions of meaninglessness and meaning: How do I make sense of my life and find my place in the world?

What I like about Tillich's approach is that it invites us to look at the evolving history of the Christian tradition not as a series of solutions to different problems but rather as an ongoing, curious, and lively engagement with the questions that people living at particular times were asking. Tillich, in other words, was suggesting that Christian theology, at its best, embraces the mystery of the culture in which it finds itself, so it can understand, appreciate, and ultimately speak into that mystery in ways that are appropriate and helpful.

For this reason, I will try in this introduction to introduce briefly each of these three cultural elements or movements that have defined our time—postmodernism, secularism, and pluralism—in terms of the central questions they are raising. This will help us not only to understand each movement better on its own terms but also to differentiate the movements from each other, as they overlap and shape each other at many points. Thinking

about these different movements in terms of questions will also help us identify some of the primary challenges and opportunities that each movement presents to us as preachers.

When it comes to *postmodernism*, the primary question is *epistemological*: How do we know for certain whether anything is true? Hence, the primary challenge that postmodernism presents is whether we can speak honestly and intelligibly about truth in a world of competing truth claims. As we'll see, postmodernists are fairly skeptical about our ability to do so. Indeed, it is precisely this skepticism about discovering, let alone describing, objective truth—the goal that coalesced in the Enlightenment and was prosecuted across modernity—that marks the period as postmodern. The casualty of such skepticism has been certainty, the belief that we can know anything for sure. But the possibility latent in such loss is the rediscovery of a vibrant faith that rests not on objective data but on the confessions, truth claims, and shared experiences of the Christian community.

Contrary to postmodernism, *secularism* has not rebelled against the notion of truth but rather against the idea that truth is rooted in God. Secularism sees the modern impulse to consign religion to the private sphere of our lives and takes that to its natural conclusion—determining that religion, and therefore the God that animates it, has little to no place in the public sphere. Hence, secularism is marked first and foremost by a *loss of transcendence* and the conviction that what we see around us, the material and physical world, is finally all there is. This materialism, while it flourished for a few decades, has more recently induced a crisis of hope, a growing conviction that whatever our advances, we cannot validate our material pursuits as valid, let alone worthwhile. The questions of the secular age are therefore more existential: Where do we find hope? Do my life and my labor have any enduring value or meaning?

The challenge Christian preachers have faced since the Enlightenment and increasingly with the full blooming of the secular age in the late twentieth century has been to justify the transcendent claims of Christianity in light of the more immanent standards of human reason. But as the secular story has fallen short, providing a too-limited view of human life, preachers have the opportunity to offer hearers hope rooted in the audacious claims of the biblical story, in this way not only recovering a palpable sense of hope but also reclaiming much of our ordinary lives as arenas in which we can experience the ongoing work of God to love and bless the world.

Pluralism, the third element of our cultural landscape I want to explore, emerged as the great paradox of a secular age that ended up being, against

most predictions, a highly religious age. But that religiousness is of a distinctly different character than the one our parents knew. Faced with a plethora of religious and spiritual options, as well as a host of other meaning-making narratives, Christians who could not adopt a conservative isolationism in relation to the pluralistic culture in which we live have developed a more cosmopolitan outlook that stresses the value of all religious views. Whatever the intrinsic value of such an open-minded position, the downside has been an increasing inability to name the distinctiveness of Christianity. This has resulted in a corresponding loss of Christian identity that has had grave consequences for church attendance. As people find themselves nearly overwhelmed by the number of opportunities and obligations presented to them, and absent a sense of the distinctiveness or utility of the Christian narrative, they have increasingly chosen to do something other than worship at church on Sunday morning, something presumably more meaningful to them than listening to well-crafted sermons and singing classic hymns.

The pressing questions of the pluralistic age therefore take shape around identity, both individual and communal: What does it mean to be Christian? How does the Christian story help me make sense of and navigate my life? In a world saturated by meaning-making stories, how do we pass ours on? Despite the numerous challenges that arise from living in a world of many faiths and stories, there are also significant opportunities for preachers. In particular, if we take seriously the possibility that preaching is not only called to proclaim the hope-creating promises of the gospel but also to help believers own and articulate those promises for themselves, we may not only reconfigure preaching but also fashion a useful and compelling Christian identity for this and future generations.

THE PATH FORWARD

We are, I believe, at a crossroads. My hope through this book is to help us identify this crossroads more clearly so that we can make a faithful decision about which path to take forward.

To get us started down this path, my intention is to address each of these three cultural movements in two chapters. In chapters 1, 3, and 5, I will first sketch the contours of postmodernism, secularism, and pluralism, respectively, in order to offer an initial theological and homiletical response. In chapters 2, 4, and 6, I will isolate a distinct and concrete dimension of each respective movement in order to offer preachers more focused suggestions on how to preach in this day and age. In this way, I hope to offer a straightforward analysis of the age in which we live and concrete suggestions for preaching into it so

we may embrace the mystery of our age and respond with sermons that are as fitting to our culture as they are faithful to the gospel.

But while that's the simple and straightforward story, it's not the most accurate one. Truth be told, this book was written backward. Most books, you see, start when the author has an idea, thesis, or argument, which the author then articulates in the writing process. But in this case, I realized on the plane home from a conference just over a year ago that my own sense of preaching had changed significantly over the last decade. This wasn't a complete surprise; I knew I was teaching differently and that the focus of my writing had shifted. But on that plane ride, I realized just how far I'd wandered from what I'd originally been taught.

When I got home, I started looking at some of the work of the last decade and discovered that the significant twists and turns of my journey as a preacher could be traced through a few key pieces I'd written. One or two of these were published in theological journals, but the others were conference addresses, classroom lectures, and at least one sermon. As I read through them, I realized I'd been attending to these issues of postmodernism, secularism, and pluralism for some time, long before I'd actually found names for them.

Once I'd named my own journey in this way, my hope was to pull together and organize these various pieces and get them quickly off to a publisher. But it wasn't that easy. While I'd written them as stand-alone pieces, when I placed side by side they began talking to each other so I had to go back and revise (and in some cases, completely rewrite) earlier work to allow this conversation greater coherence and unity.

What you have before you is the final result—not “final” in the sense that I've figured it all out, but rather in the sense that I am finally satisfied that these six chapters, now presented as a sustained narrative rather than a collection of essays, sketch the world in which we live and preach, a world that is strikingly different than the one for which I was trained. But while I am sometimes daunted by the challenges of this strange new world, I have also come to take great delight in it, reveling in its mystery and energized by the opportunities it presents. I hope that after reading these pages, you too will come to know better, respect, and delight in the mystery of this age, knowing this is precisely the world that God loves so very much.