# Postmodern Preaching Based on a Process Model

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Abstract: Contemporary homiletics has moved beyond the model of preaching the biblical text as a set of objective propositions that are explained to the congregation. It now engages a postmodern understanding in which the meaning of a text is constructed in an interaction between the text and its readers/hearers. One way to fashion a postmodern homiletic is through a model based on process hermeneutics. Using this model, this paper will approach the biblical text as a complex of proposals that act as "lures" for the reader/hearer, and consider the ways that such textual "lures" might be both identified and preached.

Postmodernism has thrown a monkey wrench into the smoothly running worlds of both biblical studies and homiletics. Not long ago, biblical scholars worked secure in the confidence that historical criticism held the key that would unlock the message of any biblical text. What any text "meant" in its historical context is what it should "mean" to us today.[1] Texts were analyzed only after being progressively disassembled down to their smallest components. Meanwhile, homileticians were happily designing sermons around three points and a poem. A good sermon was a didactic, rational exposition of a message that had been uncovered in the biblical text. The hermeneutical task, at least as far as homileticians were concerned, was to discover the "real" meaning of a text so that its message could be objectively communicated to the congregation. Although aspects of the text such as literary genre, narrative flow, and rhetorical style may have been noted by biblical scholars, they were rarely considered by homileticians.

This is, of course, an oversimplification, and somewhat of a parody of the situation. But if such a world ever really existed, postmodernism has permanently changed it; and it surely exists no more. The privileged place of historical-critical

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[1] K. Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 1 (ed. G. A. Buttrick; Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 418-431.

methods has been forced to yield to other methods of biblical criticism; and the idea that any text contains a stable, identifiable message that can be teased out and objectively packaged for congregational consumers has been largely discarded.[2] Postmodernism insists that no text, biblical or otherwise, can be objectively approached. Moreover, meaning is created through a dynamic interaction between reader and text. Because each reader brings her own perspective to this interaction, any given text offers a multiplicity of potential readings.[3] Further, no one reading is privileged over any other. No reader, scholarly or otherwise, can lay claim to the "proper" interpretation of a text.[4] Homileticians, for their part, have recognized the need to close the gap that the old didactic model had set in place between the listener and the text. Sermon designs that integrate narrative flow, dynamic imagery, and resolution of textual tensions have been proposed.[5] Postmodern sermons are described in such terms as interpretive, deconstructive, transgressive, and pluralistic.[6] We have clearly left the old idea that an effective sermon consists of "three points and a poem" far behind!

But this postmodern shift has brought its own set of problems. When a text is understood as being the carrier of a message, it is a relatively straightforward task to isolate that message and to devise strategies for objectively presenting it to a congregation. But how does one approach a text if it does not contain a stable message? How does one design a sermon? What is an appropriate homiletic goal if it

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[2] For surveys of postmodern methods of biblical criticism, refer to Janice Capel Anderson and Steven D. Moore, eds., *Mark & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); Gale A. Yee, ed., *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).
[3] Robert M. Fowler, "Who Is 'The Reader' in Reader Response Criticism?" *Semeia* 31 (*Reader Response Approaches to Biblical and Secular Texts*, ed. Robert Detweiler, 1985), 5-23.
[4] Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995).
[5] Richard L. Eslinger, *The Web of Preaching: New Options in Homiletic Method* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002).
[6] Ronald J. Allen, "Preaching and Postmodernism," *Interpretation* 55/1 (January 2001), 34-48.

is not objective communication? Insights offered by process theology may help to answer such questions.

Together with postmodernism, process theology presupposes that reality is created interactively by those who participate in it. A comprehensive review of process theology is clearly beyond the scope of this paper.[7] A few highlights of the process perspective, however, are necessary.[8] In process thought, reality consists of units of energy called *actual occasions*. These actual occasions are concrete events that exist in time; and each one participates in continuing relationships with a multitude of processes that are both internal and external. Actual occasions both influence and are influenced by the relationships in which they participate. Reality is thus continuously changing as actual occasions interact in their ongoing interrelationships. Each occasion appropriates possibilities from all the others in a selective process known as *prehension*. If an occasion prehends a possibility as being positive, that possibility is integrated into its own reality. If the prehension is negative, however, that possibility is eliminated. The goal of each occasion is to realize a future in which all prehended possibilities converge and integrate into a final harmonious existence. God both sets values on all possibilities and integrates them into the divine nature. God's ultimate aim for the cosmos is that it might actualize a harmony as much as possible like that of the divine nature, which is the "perfect instance of creative harmony and relationality."[9] Thus, God has a goal for the world; but what each actual occasion does with that goal

[7] For an discussion of process thought as it relates to Christian theology, refer to Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God Christ Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology*, revised edition (New York: Crossroad, 1989). She presents a readable summary of process thought on pages 237-259.
[8] Process thought in general and this system in particular is based on the system of Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, corrected edition (eds. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne; New York: Free Press, 1978).
[9] Clark M. Williamson and Ronald J. Allen, *A Credible and Timely Word: Process Theology and Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1991), 22.

depends on how it prehends all of the other occasions with which it is in relationship. The model is completely interactive, and incorporates both human freedom and divine intent.

How is a religious text such as the Bible understood in this process model? From a process perspective, all texts are clusters of propositions that pertain to events in the past and concern possibilities for the future.[10] Propositions are not statements of objective reality, but proposals regarding the nature of existence. They are abstractions that function as lures for feeling, enticing the reader to perceive past actions, people, or descriptions "in particular ways in the subject's process of self-creation."[11] Further, from a process viewpoint, it is more important that propositions be interesting than that they be objectively true. Propositions that do not catch the interest of the reader run the risk of being ignored, and would thus have no opportunity to be prehended and appropriated into the reality of the reader. Texts grow out of the past and "pave the way for the advance into novelty as lures for creative emergence in the future."[12] In this model, the biblical text is understood to lure the reader into thinking and acting in novel ways that are congruent with God's ultimate goal for the world. This novelty transcends even the original intent of the texts' authors in at least two ways. First, since all language is symbolic, texts are only inexact expressions of their authors' original intent. Each new reading thus offers the possibility for creative new meanings that the authors never intended. Further, any text will never be perceived by one reader in exactly the same way as it is by another. It will invariably be encountered by later readers differently than

[10] Ronald L. Farmer, *Beyond the Impasse: The Promise of a Process Hermeneutic* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997). Chapter 5 (pp. 103-107) discusses the nature of texts from a process perspective.
[11] Ibid, 92.
[12] Ibid, 92.

it was by its original audience. The reader's background, life situation, and interpretive community inevitably impacts the interaction between reader and text that results in the creation of meaning.

This brings us, then, to homiletics. Where biblical preaching is concerned, a sermon should facilitate the listener's encounter with the biblical text. Since any text is a complex of lures that engage both intellect and emotion, an effective sermon considers not only the theological foundations of a biblical text, but also its rhetorical features. In the best case, it will elicit a complex of reinforcing lures for both thought and feeling in its listeners. Contemporary homileticians have already moved in this direction. They encourage analysis of the pericope being preached to ascertain how it "works" in the consciousness of the reader; and literary factors such as narrative flow, character development, and irony are considered.[13] Twists of plot and unexpected events are integrated into homiletic designs such as David Buttrick's "moves" and Eugene Lowry's "sudden shift."[14] These approaches are compatible with a process model in which sermons function by helping the congregation to create meaning in active partnership with the biblical text. In a process model, one goal of a biblically based sermon would be to help the biblical text to lure the reader into thinking and acting in ways that are congruent with God's goal for the world. Textual lures must be presented in such a way that the listeners can not only encounter them, but also to perceive them as positive and to integrate them in appropriate ways into their lives. Barry Woodbridge has expressed this goal in this way: "The task of preaching is to

[13] Richard L. Eslinger, *Narrative & Imagination: Preaching the Worlds that Shape Us* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989).
[14] David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); Eugene L. Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997).

expose these texts in such ways that their novel lures for feeling may be heard within the continuity of their historical meanings within the life of the Christian (or other scriptural) community."[15]

A word of clarification is necessary regarding these textual lures for feeling. They do not exist apart from the text; but they are also not contained in the text any more than a text contains meaning. Lures exist and function only in the interaction between text and reader. They are cues that are meant to elicit an emotional response from the reader and thus ultimately to suggest a desired behavior. A small example will illustrate the way that one such lure might work. Judges 4 begins the story of Deborah's liberation of Israel from King Jabin of Canaan. In verse 3 we are told that Jabin had nine hundred iron chariots. At the time of the story, Israel did not yet possess the technology to make iron. An enemy with nine hundred iron chariots would have been perceived as unbeatable! The effect of this detail on a Late Bronze Age listener would be similar to a modern day American learning that Osama bin Laden had acquired nine hundred flying saucers, each one of which was equipped with a death ray. The punch of the story is enhanced; Israel's liberation is made all the more astonishing; and God is presented as all the more powerful.

It is clearly crucial that sermons engage the listeners beyond mere intellectual encounters with the text. This is not to say that a preacher should attempt to disengage the brains of the listeners; far from it! But it does mean that the listeners' feelings must be engaged in their encounter with the text as well as their thoughts. Many postmodern homileticians already emphasize that sermons are most effective when images are

[15] Barry A. Woodbridge, "An Assessment and Prospective for a Process Hermeneutic," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47 (1979), 121-128.

used in appropriate combination with theological discourse.[16] While theological commentary in a sermon engages the thought processes of the listeners, images engage their feelings and their imaginations. Equally vital in process preaching is the ability to "remove obstacles so that the congregation may hear what the Spirit is trying to say to each member."[17] If the listeners are to create meaning in partnership with the biblical text, then they must *encounter* the biblical text, and not just listen to sermons that explain it!

One major obstacle to an effective encounter with the Bible's textual lures is the vast gulf that yawns between the time that the biblical text was composed and our own. Reader-response criticism has helped us to realize that the actual reader of any text is not the same as its implied reader. The implied reader of any text is born in the imagination of its author, and is thus embedded in the author's culture, background, values, and presuppositions. The farther away that an actual reader is from the author of a text, the farther away that its implied reader will be from the actual one. This is clearly the case when biblical texts are considered. These texts were written long ago in a culture that bears almost no resemblance to that of most modern readers. Our worldview differs profoundly from that of the biblical text's implied reader!

The story of Tamar and Judah in Genesis 38 is a case in point. Tamar is Judah's daughter-in-law, the wife of his son Er. But Er dies before they have any children. According to Levirate marriage law, his brother Onan is now expected to impregnate Tamar. But Onan is not willing to father offspring for his brother's widow, so he

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[16] Richard L. Eslinger, "Narrative and Imagery," in *Intersections: Post-Critical Studies in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 65-87.
[17] William A. Beardslee, John B. Cobb, Jr., David J. Lull, Russell Pregeant, Theodore J. Weeden, Sr., and Barry A. Woodbridge, *Biblical Preaching on the Death of Jesus* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 37.

practices *coitus interruptus* whenever he sleeps with Tamar. The story tells us that God disapproved of Onan's action; so Onan dies as well. Now Judah is unwilling to risk the death of his third son Shelah; so he stalls, telling Tamar that Shelah is not yet old enough to perform his Levirate duties. Tamar then tricks Judah, disguising herself as a prostitute, sleeping with Judah when he requests her services, and getting Judah's signet ring from him before their encounter is concluded. Sure enough, Tamar gets pregnant. But when she is accused of prostitution, she displays the signet ring and announces that Judah is the father of her child. At the story's conclusion, Judah responds, "She is more right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah."

This story presupposes that the reader not only understands but also approves of Levirate marriage. A modern reader who encounters this text would in all probability not understand God's condemnation of Onan who "spilled his seed on the ground." Further, Tamar would undoubtedly be censured for her act of trickery that resulted in her impregnation by her own father-in-law. And the final punch of the story – that Tamar was more righteous than Judah, because he did not send his third son to impregnate her – would be lost all together. The effect of the textual lures on a modern reader would, in fact, be a complete reversal of the effects that the text might have had on its original readers.

This distance from the text does not present an obstacle in all cases. After all, we share many values with the implied readers of the biblical text: devotion to God, fidelity, and love of neighbor. Modern readers create appropriate meanings through encounters with the biblical text every day. But the textual lures will be most effective if they are encountered from the perspective of its original audience. Since our cultural

cues and presuppositions are so very different from those of the original audience, those lures may not function as intended as they encounter modern readers. Some, in fact, will not function at all. Not only is their context foreign, their subjects are frequently uninteresting to the typical congregational member. Harry Emerson Fosdick's famous comment is still appropriate: "Only the preacher proceeds still upon the idea that folk come to church desperately anxious to discover what happened to the Jebusites."[18] The problem is exacerbated by the fact that texts were written to be read in their larger context. But biblical texts as used in many modern settings are not read in any larger context! In the interest of holding the attention of the congregation and because of time constraints, only snippets of the biblical text are used in most worship settings. They are presented in isolation and read (frequently badly!) without regard for either their literary context or their dramatic potential. These practices eviscerate the biblical text; and it is a testimony to its power that any of its lures are able to function at all in their encounter with the listener! Historical criticism and literary methods can help the preacher to recover the power of the biblical lures. The goal is to determine the impact that the text might have made on its implied audience. Why was it interesting to its earliest readers? What kind of effect might it have produced in their consciousness? With answers to questions like these, the preacher stands a better chance of decreasing the distance between modern readers and ancient text so that the two can engage in an effective encounter.

Historical critical methods hold enormous potential for understanding the expectations of the biblical texts' implied audiences. Studies under this umbrella hold in

[18] Harry Emerson Fosdick, "What Is the Matter with Preaching?" *Harper's Magazine*, July 1928. Reproduced in O. C. Edwards, *A History of Preaching*, Vol. 2 (CD-ROM; Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 535-547.

common “a general agreement that texts should be interpreted in their historical contexts, in light of the literary and cultural conventions of their times.”[19] Form studies, for example, point out ways that texts both conform to and depart from expected structures. Their results can suggest how the original audiences might have responded to those structures. Redaction studies suggest how earlier texts were modified to impact audiences other than the original listeners. Additions or changes in context modified the textual lures as their audiences changed. Sociological studies can suggest what the expectations of the original audiences may have been, and how those expectations were reinforced or subverted by the textual lures. Such studies need to be undertaken by a variety of scholars from a wide diversity of cultures and backgrounds, since these variables influence the way that any scholar approaches the text. This diversity is necessary to help preachers as they design sermons for congregations from a similar diversity of cultures and backgrounds.

Working hand in glove with historical critical methods are literary methods that can be broadly classed as reader-response. These approaches concentrate on the experiential effects that occur in a reader when the text is encountered. The classic description of such a study is Robert Fowler’s *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark*.[20] He notes that textual rhetoric is frequently targeted not towards the audience’s cognition, but towards their emotion. These emotions are responses to cues in the text; or, as the process model would express it, as they prehend the textual lures. The desired effect of the entire gospel is

[19] John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 4.
[20] Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 1996).

thus the formation of a community of faith as a result of their responses. Fowler comments with reference to the Gospel of Mark that it "is not so much designed to construct its own world as it is designed to construct its own reader."[21] Its intent is not so much to *inform* its readers as to *form* them. This is also a foundational homiletic goal. A sermon that aims only to impart information to its listeners bears more resemblance to a keynote address than to a liturgical experience.

In conversation with the results of both historical and literary criticism, the preacher will then be able to approach the text from a new perspective. Instead of looking for a theological or ethical message to extract from it, he will take a more interactive approach, and consider how the text works in the consciousness of its readers. She will determine what its lures for feelings might be, and how they might work as the listeners encounter the text. He will design a sermon that works in harmony with these lures, and directs the emotions of the listeners so that they reinforce the theological understanding that is the basis of the sermon. Whether the text aims to reassure, to puzzle, or even to shock, its lures can be exploited as they encounter the listeners. Perhaps the listeners will even be moved to appropriate new behaviors into their lives that are appropriate to the goals of the faith community of which they are a part. In this best case, they will be formed as well as informed because of their encounter with the text as it has been interpreted from the sermon's perspective.

In summary, then: postmodern homiletics understands that any community of faith must be nurtured through theological understanding into praxis in a way that is appropriate for that community. Process theology offers a way to work towards that goal as the biblical text is not only preached, but also encountered by the listeners. In

[21] Ibid, 57.

this model, the biblical text forms the behavior of its readers through its lures for feeling that reinforce its theological foundations. By analyzing the way that these textual lures were encountered by their original audiences, they can be reinterpreted for modern audiences. One prominent biblical scholar has commented, "Texts trigger readings. That is what they are: the occasion of a reaction."[22] Perhaps through the use of a process understanding, the distance between the biblical text and its contemporary readers might be decreased; and the power of these texts to trigger reactions might be newly appropriated in this postmodern world.

[22] Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 132. Cited in Collins, *Bible after Babel*, 17.