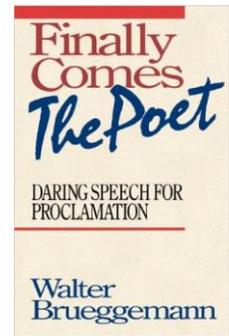


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Finally comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation

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Notes Alison Morgan February 1999



Aim to stimulate us to new possibilities in preaching - which are to stimulate the people to new possibilities in living. So the book is written as the sermon should be preached; in the poetic idiom.

Introduction: poetry in a prose-flattened world

We preach mostly to believers. Yet the gospel is to readily heard and taken for granted, as though it contained no unsettling news and no unwelcome threat. What began as news in the gospel is easily assumed, slotted, and conveniently dismissed. We depart having heard, but without noticing the urge to transformation that is not readily compatible with our comfortable believing that asks little and receives less. The gospel is thus a truth widely held, but a truth greatly reduced. It is a truth that has been flattened, trivialized, and rendered inane. Partly, the gospel is simply an old habit among us, neither valued nor questioned. But more than that, our technical way of thinking reduces mystery to problem, transforms assurance into certitude, revises quality into quantity, and so takes the categories of biblical faith and represents them in manageable shapes, p.1-2.

Preaching among us happens in this context in which truth is greatly reduced. That means the gospel may have been twisted, pressed, tailored, and gerrymandered until it is comfortable with technological reason that leaves us unbothered, and with ideology that leaves us with uncriticized absolutes.... We shall not be the community we hope to be if our primary communications are in modes of utilitarian technology and managed, conformed values, p.2.

To address the issue of a truth greatly reduced requires us to be poets that speak against a prose world. P 3. By prose I refer to a world that is organized in settled formulae... By poetry I mean language that moves, that jumps at the right moment, that breaks open old worlds with surprise, abrasion and pace. Poetic speech is the only proclamation worth doing in a situation of reductionism... Such preaching is not moral instruction or problem solving or doctrinal clarification. It is not good advice, nor is it romantic caressing, nor is it a soothing good humour. It is, rather, the ready, steady, surprising proposal that the real world in which God invites us to live is not the one made available by the rulers of this age. The preacher has an awesome opportunity to offer an evangelical world: an existence shaped by the news of the gospel... Our preferred language is to call such speech prophetic, but we might also term it poetic.

Von Balthasar: God needs prophets in order to make himself known, and all prophets are necessarily artistic. What a prophet has to say can never be said in prose.

The world offered in the biblical tradition of poetic utterance hardly has a claim to reality; sounds like fiction. But it is precisely the work of fiction to probe beyond settled truth and walk to the edge of alternatives not yet available to us. It is a proposal that opens the way for transformation.

In this book, then, I want to consider preaching as a poetic construal of an alternative world. The purpose of such preaching is to cherish the truth, to open the truth from its pervasive reductionism in our society, to break the fearful rationality that keeps the news from being new... The power of poetry - shattering, evocative speech that breaks fixed conclusions and presses us always toward new, dangerous, imaginative possibilities. P.6.

4 things needed:

- **the text**

Congregation gathers with a vague memory of the text, a memory which has the text mostly reduced, trivialized, and domesticated. They don't doubt the text; but they haven't been able to remember it. They have an ideological framework which they have to fit everything into. No room for mystery or surprise; so they take something from it and domesticate it. Result is that the text sounds like Adam Smith or Rousseau or Freud or Marx...

- **the congregation**

They may understand only in some inchoate way, but they have in fact made some vague decision about the cruciality of this text.

- **The specific occasion for speech**

If the text is reduced to the prose of daily life, then we become mindless conformists or angry protestors. Into this situation the preacher must speak. She does not get to speak a new text. She must speak an old text - the one everybody knows. From the very first syllable, the ending is already known. But it is a script to be played afresh, so that in this moment of drama the players render the play as a surprise to permit a fresh hearing, a second opinion. At the end there is a powerful sense that a world has been rendered in which I may live, a world that is truly home but from which I have been alienated.

- **The better world given as fresh revelation**

Something is revealed - a probe behind the closed parameters of religion too-long settled and politics too-easily comfortable. Not only truth disclosed but life disclosed. Life unclosed, life made open, certitudes broken so that we can redecide, images moving, imagination assaulting ideology. We find new configurations of life yet unformed, unthought, but now available. Possibility overwhelms necessity.

They go home. Everything is the same; except there is a new word, hope, possibility. It is not a new truth, but rather one long known that had been greatly reduced.

1. Numbness and ache: the strangeness of healing

The preacher is called to weave an artistic connection between the text in its elusive, liberated truth, and the congregation in its propensity to hear the text in forms of reductionism. That task requires articulation of a great truth in the text that may be unnoticed reality in the congregation - unnoticed, or noticed and rejected, or routinised. Preaching makes it possible for something that has been closed to be powerfully disclosed... In addressing the theme of guilt and healing, the preacher has a threefold task of articulation. First, the preacher is to explicate the reality, power, destructiveness, and hurt that comes with sin and its accompanying guilt. That reality is more powerful and more destructive than we are wont to imagine. Second, the preacher is to construe an alternative. The biblical text trusts and asserts that reconciliation, forgiveness, and restoration are indeed possible.... The third task of articulation for the preacher is to trace and voice the delicate, tortured, dramatic way in which God moves for and with us from one world to the other, a move wrought in love and faithfulness, but also wrought in grief and humiliation... this threefold task of articulation is so difficult precisely because these claims are already known in the church. They are, however, frequently known in such reductionist ways. The whole drama of guilt and forgiveness .. is present and discerned in two terribly destructive forms [guilt and punishment, or cheap grace]. ...13-15

Example: theme of guilt and healing. Task:

- to explicate the reality, power, destructiveness and hurt that comes with sin and its accompanying guilt
- to construe an alternative - the text asserts that reconciliation, forgiveness and restoration are possible
- to trace and voice the way in which God moves for and with us from one world to the other, in love and faithfulness but also in grief and humiliation.

The task is difficult precisely because these claims are already known in the church, but known in reductionist ways. In particular there are 2 major misunderstandings:

- o notion that we live in a world of strict retribution where people receive the payoff for their acts, so we are judged and fated; hard judgment.
- o opposite notion whereby grace is as reduced as guilt; God can easily write off sin, and things are made OK; soft grace.

We know however that genuine love and real forgiveness do not work in such mechanical fashion. The truth is that the drama of guilt and grace does not happen in some automatic or mechanical way. It happens only through the fabric of care and suffering whereby God enters into every cubit of the process.

So who is out there? People with layers of alienation that result from sin and that are experienced as guilt. The gathered congregation includes those who are profoundly burdened with guilt, whose lives are framed by deep wrong, by skewed relations beyond resolve, shareholders in the public drama of brutality and exploitation. Heaviness; and yet yearning. Sunday morning is, for some, a last hope that life need not be lived in alienation. We need not dwell on the sin that produces alienation. Suffice with Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud to say that sin characteristically is manifested in distorted relations to sex and money, in lust and in greed, in abuse of neighbour and in the squandering of creation. 13-15

We bury [the alienation and the guilt]... in order to get on with our life as best we can... Bury alienation and guilt in numbness and after a while one does not notice .. The preacher must address that which is buried, because even when hidden, the alienation remains powerful and destructive. Guilt lingers unnoticed. It reduces us to automatons: weary, cynical, resigned. Resignation causes failed communication. Not only do we not talk to Fidel Castro, having ended diplomatic relations, but we also do not talk to wife or husband or children either. We have been over the same ground of buried guilt so many times and accepted it in our lives so long we have labeled it normalcy. We come on Sunday morning with a desperate yearning to move past that lingering immobilization. Guilt, unaddressed, with finally kill.¹⁷

Believers whose faith is greatly diminished may utter a truth greatly reduced: 'smile, God loves you.' Does God love because God is engaged in some cover-up with us and does not know about the alienation? Because if God knew, God would not meet me with a smile, but with a deep, deep cry for life run amiss. The alienation is heavy, serious, and burdensome for us, because it is heavy, serious and burdensome for the alienated father God, for the mother God who grieves for us while we are too numb to grieve... Over time, what happens on Sunday morning is an artistic rendering of a new truth-filled world in which many people may come to live and begin to function again with the freedom that belongs peculiarly to God's children... But not until the poet comes, the one who speaks honestly about the incongruity, who speaks buoyantly about the alternative. 17

Evangelical preaching is invited to break out of the conservatism that makes God function mechanically, for such a scholastic God has no power to save. Preaching is invited to break out of the liberalism that believes we finally can manage on our own, for managing never gives life. Preaching has to do with a life poured out for us to deal with the residue of guilt left untouched by reparations, p. 36. ... Such and inscrutable resolution of guilt must be articulated poetically, because the reality of God's self-giving outruns all our capacities to speak about it. ... Unless we speak poetically, we invite terrible reductions. Unless we speak poetically, God's self-giving transformation will be heard as a form of cheap grace that costs God nothing because God simply overrides. Our poetry, however, helps us articulate how costly our new life is for God, p. 37.

Sketch of OT understanding of guilt and healing

1. Jeremiah: God has noticed the problem. Jer 6.13-15; 5.25-28.

2. God responds with wrath and affront (we know this but reduce it to mechanistic principles of punishment); we are under judgment. In the poetry of Jeremiah, God does not meet us in love, but is utterly aghast. Jer.5.7,9,29.

3. God's anger is compounded by God's utter anguish at having hoped and been betrayed, at having yearned and failed. The indignant judge is yet the pitiful mother and the grieving father. Our guilt causes anger but also deep hurt. Jer 3.19;9.1;31.20.

4. The response of God in Jeremiah invites the question: what will you do? The important thing is that a new move can be made from our side; reparation can be made. Leviticus is a study on the good news that God has indeed provided ways through the paralysis of guilt. Leviticus 6 the nitty gritty of diagnosis; and the priests prescribe the response: restoration following sin, plus 20%. Text speaks of distorted economic relations; we can extend it to personal and interpersonal relations as well.

Violation requires reparation. We all have things that belong to others (eg food, money). Lev.6.4-5.

5. Reparation is insufficient because an ache remains; underneath guilt is taintedness, uncleanness - the problem of alienation remains. So guilt requires God's action, which is given by the regularised channels of priestly action. The priests know we cannot work our own healing; that healing requires the submission of something of value; that healing is the enactment of atonement - the poison of guilt is at least as dangerous as nuclear waste and must be put away where it cannot destroy or contaminate; and that the act of putting the poison away is done not by ourselves but by the priest on our behalf. The vehicle is blood, life-blood; it is only the gift of life that answers for our guilt. So the residue of ache is dealt with by sacramental action that mediates God's own life given toward us. Lev. 6.6-7. Fully done only in Christ.

How to reduce this: treat priestly sacrifice simply as animal sacrifice; or reduce it to a slogan - saved by the blood.

The anguish of our problem is that these truths are frequently reduced in ways that rob the gospel of its power and urgency. We have the perspective of romantic psychology that concludes that I am not guilty but only 'feel' guilty. And because the problem is not taken seriously, no serious response can be entertained. And so the alienation is buried at deeper levels. Or we can tell ourselves we can rectify what is wrong by doing better and keeping my life moral; doesn't deal with the ache.

This move from guilt to healing as found in the taxonomy from Jeremiah and Leviticus announces the reality of God's rage, God's hurt, God's ache, and God's self-giving love. The panoply of God's rage, hurt, ache and love is an awesome dramatic reality in the life of faith. Our task in preaching is to find ways for the enactment of this awesome drama of self-gift. Can only be done in poetic speech, not common speech.

Reparation and residue in the NT

Matt. 5.23-26 Sermon on Mount. Anger. Reparation.

Hebrews 10.19-23. God deals with the residue, answering the question left by Leviticus (where do I get a ram with no blemish, because everything I have is caught in the blemish). God promised Abraham he would provide an adequate ram to serve reconciliation (Gen.22.8); and here it is, the blood of Jesus.

Every aspect of what is urged here as a biblical way of understanding and transforming guilt runs against the ideology of our culture. We have made a series of theological affirmations that the world does not easily embrace: that there is real guilt; that God is serious in anger and anguish; that reparations are required; and that the residue is resolved. All these claims violate our presumed world of modernity.

2. Alienation and Rage: the odd invitation to doxological communion

Yearn for communion. Reduced communion and reduced communication in our society. 2 forms of it.

1. Practice of a subjective consciousness - we no longer imagine a real live, responding other with a centre of its own. We imagine that reality is only us, with our yearnings and our cravings. Result is that we are alone.

2. Uncritical objectivism about God that assigns everything to God, that empties one's own life of dignity, worth and authority. Desire for a settled, uncritical religious assurance. But if God is so unambiguously good, then trouble must be my fault, whether cancer or broken relationships or redundancy. Brokenness of world accounted for; but by guilt.

So have twin temptations of extreme subjective consciousness and extreme objective consciousness. First leads to alienation, second to rage. Both lead to absence of conversation. This is the context of preaching. Preacher's task is to carry on both sides of the conversation.

Abraham and Moses didn't fall into these traps; both were daring in their address to God. Moses and Israel had learned that muteness leads to brick quotas (continued slavery in Egypt). Silence results in oppression. They decide not to practice muteness before Yahweh as they had before Pharaoh. So Moses petitions, intercedes, protests, cajoles, delivers ultimatums, and plays brinkmanship; and in this context Yahweh responds and yields. Numbers 11.11-14.

Bartimaeus daringly initiates interaction with Jesus; Mark 10.47. Jesus heals and says your faith has made you well. A capacity to cry out the pain has caused health to come.

Sermon is an invitation, a modeling, a permit to address God about the pain of the world. As with Bartimaeus, there are powerful forces that want to keep the pain mute.

Result is to evoke God's powerful, intervening response.

a) Abraham and God Gen 18.28-32 re Sodom. Abraham doesn't get far.

b) Jeremiah's complaint prayers; follow standard form of prayer and response in Israel. God doesn't answer according to the convention of gracious intervention; instead demands obedience and repentance, violating the convention. Jer 15.19; 12.5-6. But it is an answer.

c) Job - a third response from God. Ch 9 Job asserts God not only unreliable but a liar. God's answer is in 38-41; the poem is not Job boxing with himself, but the very voice of the creator God. Job's attempt to raise the issue of God's injustice is smothered in the torrent of words about God's greatness; when asked about justice he responds with a description of a crocodile. God is answering, yet in the very act of answering, refusing to respond.

d) Isaiah 41-43 God produces a response which is not only sovereign, but also caring and transformative.

Israel speaks again, this time in praise and celebration. Psalms. 13. 22. 26. 45. 43. Israel's strange conversation with God has its outcome in doxology, which is the proper outcome of one's life. Plea ends in praise because God is responsive to articulated hurt. The 2 way conversation between God and Israel consists in a cry of hurt, a saving response, and answering praise. This conversation permits us to become who we are formed by God to be and yearn to become.

The act of preaching is not instruction, rational discourse, or moral suasion. It is the invitation and permit to practice a life of doxology and obedience, which properly orders the ongoing relationship of sovereign and subject, which in seasons of trust is that of parent-child, or even friend and friend (Jn 15.14-15). The preacher is to enact doxology with and for the congregation, which may only now dare a move out of fearful muteness.

Israel praised God in response to his action from the beginning.

Exodus 15 Miriam - God has delivered

Judges 5 Deborah - God has confounded the rulers of this age

Praise liberates from self toward God. We affirm God's sovereign rule of creation. As we acknowledge creator, we notice creation in a new way. Psalm 148.

The song Israel sings is about God's overwhelming abundance. Ps 104, 145.

The song begins with Miriam, Moses, Deborah and the liberated slaves. Our whole history of life with God is praise as we sing ourselves free of Pharaoh, the Philistines, and the Canaanites. The song does not stop. It receives new impetus along the way as God acts again and again for the sake of our life. It is hymn of praise, not escape literature. It ends in Revelation; 5; 14; 15; 19.

The problems of praise in the modern world are acute and obvious. Praise is difficult for those caught in reductionism. Praise becomes problematic for those who perceive life as technique, and live life as a series of problems to be solved. Our relation with God is neither a problem to be solved, nor a technique to be practised. For children of modernity, technique and manipulation finally silence all serious conversation. For us to be summoned to and permitted in a serious conversation is awesome, transformative, and frightening. It is the gift of the text and the world of the preacher to lead the congregation past the reductions to praise, which is in fact communion, p.73.

The preacher faces people whose life and faith are greatly reduced - not wrong, but sadly reduced. On the one hand the reduction is to an autonomy that ends in isolation. We have come to believe in self-fulfilment and have discovered that even a 'filled' life, if alone, results in an empty self. On the other hand, the reduction is a weary, resigned trust in God's justice that collides with too much dissonant data.... The news entrusted to the preacher.. is that we are willed and destined to a more candid, passionate, transformative conversation where our lives are given us again. That more candid, passionate, transformative conversation begins with protest. It ends in praise, the final act of our true selves... The dare of preaching is to open and sustain a conversation without which we cannot live; a conversation perceived among us as subversive... The work of the poet is to permit a fresh conversation among those who are too modern, too buoyant, to desperate, too obedient.⁷⁵

3. Restlessness and Greed

In addition to our epistemology, our economics also make listening problematic. The great fact of the Western world, and therefore the circumstance of our preaching, is that we gather as restless, greedy children of disproportion, caught in an ideology of acquisitiveness. That is, social goods, social access, and social power are not equally distributed. Some have too little. Some have too much. That some have too much is intimately related to the fact that some have too little. While there are economic differentiations in the Christian community, the main body of our Western church constituency consists of adherents to and benefactors of the great Western disproportion. We have too much. We have more than our share. We have what belongs to the others, and now they want it back. This economic reality among us impinges on our capacity to hear and respond when we are addressed by God's voice of command, p.82.

Paul Ricoeur has seen as well as anyone that obedience follows imagination. Our obedience will not venture far beyond or run risks beyond our imagined world. If we wish to have transformed obedience (ie, more faithful, responsive listening), then we must be summoned to an alternative imagination, in order that we may imagine the world and ourselves differently. The link of obedience to imagination suggests that the toughness of ethics depends on poetic, artistic speech as the only speech that can evoke transformed listening. Even concerning ethics, 'finally comes the poet'. It is poetic invitation that holds the only chance of changed behaviour, a point understood and practiced by Jesus in his parables, which had such ethical bite, but such artistic delicacy. p. 85

In the ancient world.. the primary reason for prison was to contain poor people who are locked up for indebtedness [on Isaiah 61/Lk 4]. Cancellation of debts permits re-entry into public life with dignity and freedom. The jubilee year is the intervention of God, who breaks the vicious cycle - indebtedness and poverty - which is kept going by inhumane practices of land, taxes and debts, p.105.

God's voice of command. We are schooled in self-control and self-sufficiency and now God's powerful voice of command sounds, which destabilizes our favourite posture in the world... Listening is difficult because the world is organised against it; the notions of self-sufficiency and autonomy make listening difficult and obedience nearly impossible. Economics makes it problematic too. We gather as restless, greedy children of disproportion, caught in an ideology of acquisitiveness - social goods, power and access are not equally distributed; fact that some have too little is because some have too much. We have too much. Two consequences:

- a) we arrive at the conversation of preaching fatigued, anxious, desperately in control, desperate to have more control.
- b) in our restlessness, we practice greed against neighbour.

We want to receive God's voice of command either by reducing the command to conventional rules, or by treating it as irrelevant. And we aren't even in the same place; in our midst are minorities who have been silenced and nullified - old, young, women.

How to preach God's command. Finds self resisting 'ought' sermons; finds that mostly needs more strength rather than more advice. Does not need new information, but the courage, freedom, and authorization to act on what I have already been given in the gospel. Obedience follows imagination. We must therefore be summoned to an alternative imagination, so that we may imagine the world and ourselves differently. The link of obedience to imagination suggests that the toughness of ethics depends on poetic, artistic speech as the only speech that can evoke transformed listening. It is poetic invitation that holds the only chance of changed behaviour; hence the parables.

Things to imagine.

God has intervened.

Disproportion will come to an end.

We live between God's intervention and the end of the world's disproportion that he has promised.

The sermon is not normally the place for concrete moral admonition, because such admonition will only enhance the partisan distortion, either in agreement or disagreement, rather than feed the imagination. Nor is it the place for discussing public policy. The sermon is the place where the church is freed to imagine what it would be like to be intentional about mission and to embrace in our imagination acts of discipleship that we are not yet ready to accept in practice. Liturgy and proclamation precede, anticipate and authorize our action in the world.

Expository forays into the commandments

Keep the Sabbath.

Exodus 20 motivation is rest from work; means the world is not marked by frenzy, precariousness, threat or restlessness; the world has a life of its own with some sustaining power.

Deut 5 the motivation is the exodus; sabbath is to remember the liberation that permitted new life. Exodus 16 no manna on sabbath; to violate command meant not to trust. Some violated the free day of rest in order to get free food, because in their anxiety they did not believe free food would continue to be given.

Amos 8 sabbath is a day when commercial activity stops, when exploitation does not happen.

Isaiah 56 sabbath is the act of obedience that qualifies you for God's presence. It means desisting from the frantic pursuit of securing the world on our own terms.

Mark 2 and Matt 12. Jesus plucks corn and heals on sabbath. Sabbath had become so restrictive that it worked against acts and gestures of human caring. Had been distorted.

Thinking about sabbath invites us into conversation about the deep restlessness that characterises our common life - drivenness to have control. But imagination is to take a sabbatical from our commitments.

Do not covet. Isn't about jealousy. Refers to land tenure systems and management policies, and is about the systemic economic practice of greed. Jubilee laws.

Poets as they preach are permitted to perceive and voice the world differently, to initiate a new conversation. People aren't changed by new rules; deep resistance is met only by stories, images, metaphors and phrases that line out the world differently.

4. Resistance and relinquishment

Aim to draw all the themes of forgiveness, assurance and command together around the crisis of human personhood. 2 texts from Daniel. They offer a literature of hope to sustain persons in faith, confidence and resistance in the midst of persecution. A public crisis (Jewish persecution under Antiochus) is told as a story that concerns individuals and their response of faith. In our own cultural context, our crisis of identity concerns not persecution, but seduction into false notions of self. The Daniel stories model an alternative personal identity that was crucial in that ancient persecution and is crucial in our contemporary seduction. The hope to which the text of Daniel invites us is a deep resolve to hold to a God-given identity, vocation and destiny.

Daniel 1

Models an alternative mode of humanness in the face of ideological pressure to conformity. The model of humanness offered to Daniel and his friends was the route of success through conformity. Daniel turned it down. The narrative proposes that Jews under threat do not conform for the sake of well-being. Same for us - pressure to conform to religious morality, liberal ideology, consumer expectations, secular competence.

Story begins in exile (Nebuchadnezzar); but God allowed the exile and remains sovereign, which is a hidden reality which redefines Daniel's character and ability to act.

3 scenes:

I. King's invitation to new arrivees. Not malicious or devious, but a subtle seduction: invitation for ablest Jews to come into court service, to make good; offers upward mobility for Jewish boys. He offers 3 year training programme. Nothing is said about conformity, but they are to learn the proper appetites and expectations, develop company loyalty and leave private scruples outside the door. Because of the attractive possibility of royal service, we might not have noticed the high cost of conformity. Daniel did notice.

II. Vs 8 but Daniel resolved. Daniel had not let the contours of his life be submerged in the conventional definitions of the day. He had maintained a capacity for alternative perception and therefore alternative action. He had remained a free man. And he will not fit into royal expectation. He will not submerge himself in the imperial landscape. Will not let self be defiled - first hint of pejorative comment against the empire. Daniel reckons the imperial diet will distort his person. His objection is grounded in the Jewish scruple of religious purity. Chief eunuch gives in to Daniel's suggestion of a trial period. He will conform; Daniel won't. Daniel knows he needs to risk his life if he is to have a life. Cp Mark 8.35. Vegetarians come out healthier. It works to be Jewish. Daniel cannot be programmed by the empire.

III Denouement vs 17-20. They have completed their training and are brought before the king for examination. Receive the highest marks and are set up for an imperial career. Daniel's success not simply the result of rigorous training or proper diet; it is a gift of God, who is mentioned only at 2 crucial points, 9 and 17. And Neb never suspects a thing. Daniel outlasted him, and maintained freedom in his faith. He did not attempt to gain or enhance his worth by conforming, nor to save his life by keeping it.

This text is not remote from our situation in which pressures in church and in society to conform are great. Conformity happens subtly; we join the dominant ideology without noticing. The text invites us to think about an alternative: think about who you are by thinking about whose you are. Be your own person, by being in the company of God in the face of the dominant ideology.

2 factors are crucial for the working of the narrative. The hidden resolve of Yahweh is at work; he is an extra, hidden character in the story whom Neb will never notice. And then, the story is so mundane; it matters what we eat and who feeds us. Isaiah 55.1-3. Daniel discerns and Isaiah affirms, there is another bread, wine, milk, nourishment, life. Is there now?

Daniel 1 provides one perspective on preaching the great alternative of personhood given in biblical faith. Theme is not nonconformity, but the freedom, energy, and courage of an alternative identity.

Daniel 4

Confrontation between Daniel and Neb. Main assertion of the narrative is that the imagined autonomy of Neb is not sustainable, given the reality of Yahweh.

Story begins with the outcome: transformation of Neb who has been moved away from his autonomy. Neb has been changed from the military-industrial complex of the ancient world into an advocate for peace. Transforming power of gospel.

Chapter framed by praise, vs 3 and 34-15. Human life is lived differently when our days are framed, beginning and end, with praise. Inside this frame Neb recounts route by which he yielded his power to the most high. Dream; afraid. Great, powerful people do not dream, do not intend to have nightmares, do not lose control, are not intruded upon after hours. Neb and his ilk are strong, alert, in control. At night, however, voices other than his own get a chance to speak. The other voices, of God, of spirit, of the night, penetrate the empire's Strategic Defense Initiatives. He is alarmed. Summons intelligence community; but they can't manage the threat of the night. Daniel summoned. Not only is the

king no longer self sufficient, he must seek help from a source inappropriate to his imagined greatness: an exile. Crisis in which the ones who thought they knew turn out to be ignorant concerning issues of power, authority and certitude; and the uncredentialed outsider is the one who has the knowledge that matters and can save.

In the dream the tree is an assertion of order, strength, certainty, reliability; and a voice orders it to be chopped down. The narrative of the dream acknowledges there are powerful undeniable realities authorized by God that move against and sometimes overrun our pretended worlds of daylight management, knowledge and certitude. Daniel interprets, then pushes further to admonish and urge repentance. He won't; he found his alarming dream too demanding, so ignored it and thought it would pass. Most of us do this most of the time. The dream required him to change; he doesn't want to, so he ignores it. And yet it comes to pass, and he is forced to acknowledge God. When he does, he is rehabilitated.

Listening to the sermon are many who have succumbed to the world of Neb, imagining they are free, on their own, unencumbered, not needing to respond or answer. The dream pushes against this self-deception; and while we watch Neb's wrenching transformation, we are invited to our own.

Further; here we have modelled a way for us in which to communicate to the imperial, autonomous sovereigns in our midst: not by confrontation, but slowly, like a dream that comes in the night, a poet who comes in the darkness to make the king wonder, seek and ask.

Yearning for connection to God leads to docility or to autonomy; and into this situation the preacher must sound the gospel. Daniel's temptation was conformity; his link to God prevents it. A more excellent way is to resist docility, to practice an alternative way in the world that requires courage, involves risk, and brings freedom. Neb's illusion was autonomy and self-sufficiency; he thought himself accountable to none. He yields to God and finds sanity and peace, as well as power. Note: each is present in the story of the other. Daniel has to find his way around in the presence of Neb's power; Neb finds his way only because he receives clues from the newly emancipated Daniel. Neither can be separated from the other. God's new humanity requires courage of resistance, resolve to be one's own person; and also the practice of praise, engagement with the dream, and relinquishment in order to be safe.

Conclusion

Each chapter suggests that prose-reductionism of the gospel has led our believing society to misappropriate the promise of the gospel. In this context the preacher must dare to speak what is already believed but little understood and practiced. Does so by voicing an alternative, ignoring the pressures to quiet the text.

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