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### **Imagination for Proclamation: Widening the Boundaries**

All my life the church has taught me that God can forgive any sin. While I believe in God's extraordinary power to forgive, there is one inexcusable, intolerable, and indefensible sin for any preacher of the gospel. The one inexcusable homiletic sin is *the sin of being boring!* A boring sermon is an iniquitous insult to an infinitely imaginative God. Preachers should throw ourselves upon the altar and repent for the times we dishonored God with dull sermons. Lord, have mercy on us!

The first thing we learn about God in scripture is that God is creative. Genesis 1:1 highlights the creative prowess of God: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." In Genesis 1:1, the verb to create is *bara*. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, only God is the subject of this verb, since creativity is the special province of God.

Builders can build; producers can produce; manufacturers can manufacture; but only God—Elohim—only God—El Elyon, only God—El Shaddai can create. According to the biblical scholar Terence Freitheim, the verb *bara* refers to "the fundamental newness and uniqueness of what God brings into being....[consequently] no analogy from the human sphere can exhaust the meaning of God's creative activity."<sup>i</sup>

For incontrovertible evidence of God's infinite imagination, we need only consider the creation story in Genesis where God's primordial playfulness is on full display. In fact, creating got so good to God that God started "tripping" on God's own creativity.<sup>ii</sup> Thus, after various acts in the creative drama, God shouted out to Christ and the Holy Spirit in the "Ebonic" translation, "It's all good ya'll."

God said, "I feel imaginative today; so let me create luminosity leaping through deep darkness at the speed of 299 million, 792 thousand, 458 meters per second: 'Let there be light.'" Turning to Christ and the Spirit, God hollered, "It's all good ya'll."

Then God said:

How about some raging, white-water rivers, some peaceful ponds, and salty seas? It's all good ya'll. How about some dazzling daffodils and drop-dead gorgeous daisies; some extremely thick red wood trees and some succulent black eyed peas? It's all good ya'll.

Next, I'll create an opulently orange sun and some silvery stars to decorate the celestial ceiling; and I almost forgot to mention the midnight moon that will provide just enough light for creatures to do some holy love-making on hot summer nights. It's all good ya'll. I want some long-necked giraffes and swift-footed gazelles, some earth-tunneling inchworms and plant-eating iguanas. It's all good ya'll. Now, let me create a six-legged, lime-green praying mantis and some two-legged, mocha brown, African-accented praying people. It's all good ya'll.

God's creativity blew God's mind so much so that after it was all done, God leaned back in the lazy boy and said, "My imagination is mad crazy; it's off the chain good, it's super def jam good: 'jam, o jam, jam, Jesus, jam for me.'"iii And Jesus broke out with a jam; the Holy Ghost got a sanctified swerve on, and the Trinity just "tripped" for a while on God's imagination. Then, after the after party, they took a break....and "God rested from all the work that God had done in creation."iv

This is the God whom we represent in our sermons. Thus, it would be homiletically criminal for us to dishonor an imaginative God with unimaginative sermons. Preaching that lacks creative flair not only dishonors God, but it also desecrates the memory of our African ancestors. Our ancestors came to these shores not as *immigrants* seeking a better life but as *inventory* already considered dead. Every facet of American life—from the courthouse to the White House—was mobilized against our ancestors. Yet they rose above injustice and illiteracy to redeem the soul of a corrupt nation and a compromised church. Over decades and centuries, Africans in the United States transformed the religion they received from white missionaries.v These Africans removed the racist elements of colonial Christianity and replaced them with African practices and cultural wisdom.

In the creative mixture of Christianity and African Traditional Religion; of biblical stories and African folklore; of Christian message and African music, the black church was forged. In its early "invisible" days, the black church sustained the liberation longings of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, of Nat Turner and Frederick Douglass.vi In its later "visible" forms, the black church "remained a refuge of resistance" where oppressed black people "assembled to be renewed in the spirit, [and] to be fortified in the mind."vii Were it not for the fervent prayers and imaginative preaching, the moaning and singing, the five-cent offerings and fish fries of those early, faithful Africans in the United States, the black church would not be what and where it is today.viii

Furthermore, had it not been for the rhetorical and moral imagination of the black church, a *black man* would not currently be in the *White House*. Much has been made of President Obama's rhetorical skill. Undoubtedly, his fierce intellect and Ivy-league education contribute to his oratorical finesse. Yet, scholars of black preaching and black culture recognize that the lyricism of Obama's language is the mother tongue of the black church. If Obama's oratory is soaring it's because that black church on the south side of Chicago were he sat for nearly twenty years strapped wings on his back. Furthermore, President Obama did not conjure up the "audacity of hope" from thin air. He inherited that hope from a black preacher and a black church who mentored him into his greatness.

In immeasurable ways, people in the United States and abroad are indebted to the black sacred imagination for its role in creating the black church—a community which has compelled this country to embody its noble creeds through righteous deeds. We are heirs of a creative God. Creativity is in our *spiritual* DNA. When creation was conceived in the womb of God, the creative impulse was passed from God to us through the cosmic umbilical cord. In other words, some of God’s creative juice seeped into our veins and pores.

Also, as black preachers, we are heirs of a creative people. Creativity is in our *cultural* DNA. If black people can take the intestines of a pig and turn them into a holiday delicacy, there is no excuse for any black preacher to ever preach an uncreative, unimaginative, boring sermon. Whenever a preacher is boring, it is evidence that there has been a genetic mutation in that preacher’s cosmological and cultural DNA.

Preaching is not simply the dissemination of information. Preaching is artful oratory that creates the conditions for an authentic decision about God. When people make the right decision about God, the consequence is *shalom*—God’s intended wholeness for the creation. As a preacher, you are not simply peddling information. If preaching is just information, then email or fax in your sermon and sleep in on Sunday morning. Preaching is more than information. In preaching, you are seeking to be an *incarnation* of God’s *revelation* which can convert the *imagination* so that the *information* can lead to eternal *transformation*.

In his 1986 Hampton sermon “God on the Left Hand Side,” the late Dr. William A. Jones, Jr. of Bethany Baptist Church in Brooklyn insisted: “A great truth, poorly spoken—in dry, unfeeling, uncaring language—leaves the listener without the fire and flame of inspiration. But any truth that rides on wings of poetic cadence captures the mind and warms the heart.”<sup>ix</sup> Black preaching demands that prophetic truth and rhetorical beauty live together in holy, homiletic wedlock. When truth and beauty hook up homiletically, mind and heart are transformed, and the blessed boundaries of who God wants us to be are widened. Prophetic preaching is as much about imagination as it is exhortation.

Let me say more about how imaginative preaching widens the boundaries and thereby assists the aims of prophetic ministry. Prophetic preaching involves collaborating with God to deliver people from tight spaces. Deliverance in the Bible is often depicted as the removal of people from tight situations—situations that restrict them. For example, Psalm 107:13 says, “Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and God saved them from their distress.” The Hebrew word translated “trouble” (*tsar*) means “tight place.” That word also can mean “hard pebble.” We could poetically render Psalm 107:13 this way: “Then they cried to the LORD in their tight place or rocky space, and God saved them from their distress.” In other words, prophetic ministry seeks to save people who are stuck in a tight situation—that narrow nook between a rock and hard place.

In these difficult days, many people are cramped into some terribly tight places. Examples of tight situations are everywhere. Brothers still get arrested for “DWB” (“Driving While Brown”); that’s a tight situation. Mothers on our missionary boards are being beaten by daddies on our deacon boards, as the church remains eerily silent about domestic abuse. That’s a tight situation. Less than 1% of corporate heads are African Americans; that’s a tight situation.

African Americans and Latinos still get “redlined” when trying to secure loans; that’s a tight situation. Gun violence continues hijacking the hopes of our youth and their families in urban communities. At least twenty-four kids killed in Chicago this year alone. That’s a tight situation.

God desires to use our preaching to create space, to enlarge options, to broaden possibilities. We are mistaken if we think that prophetic preaching is simply identifying the tight situation. That may be a part of prophetic preaching, but it’s the easier part. Most folk can name the problems. The rigorous aspect of prophetic preaching is articulating the possibilities beyond the problems.

To preach prophetically is to widen the boundaries so that people have room to maneuver from their tight situations. Imaginative preaching widens the boundaries so that people can breathe, thereby avoiding annihilation through asphyxiation. Homiletic creativity is not a useless exercise in rhetorical ornamentation. On the contrary, homiletic creativity is a mechanism of prophetic transformation.

Through skillfully painted images and carefully turned phrases, preaching presents the expansive possibilities of an existence in line with the perfect will of God.<sup>x</sup> Thus, before preachers can be prophets or politicians, they may have to be “artists.” Paul Robeson once declared, “The purpose of art is not just to show life as it is, but to show life as it should be.”<sup>xi</sup> Poetic articulation and prophetic action can mutually enrich one another.

Since prophetic preaching is to show life as it should be, let us return to the litany of tight situations mentioned above. In your sermons, don’t just talk about brothers still getting arrested for “Driving While Brown.” Imagine in your sermon a community police review board that will mobilize to vote the mayor and chief of police out of office if racial profiling is not curtailed.

Don’t just give statistics about domestic abuse. Imagine in your sermon a curriculum in your men’s ministry where brothers learn how to express themselves without resorting to violence. Don’t just talk about the lack of black corporate leadership. Imagine in your sermon a program where the business leaders in your church reach out to drug dealers and prostitutes and teach them job skills. Don’t just talk about black and brown folk not getting loans. Imagine in your sermon a black-owned, comprehensive, collective banking system that would make Citibank and Bank of America blink. Since our forty acres and a mule ain’t coming, it’s time to create new ground and plow it ourselves.

Don’t just talk about black on black gun violence. Imagine in your sermon a massive protest of millions of black people demanding that President Obama stop the flow of semi-automatic weapons into the United States. Don’t just celebrate that we have a black President; creatively agitate until the President realizes that homeland security also involves him standing up to the National Rifle Association, and not just chasing Al-Qaeda around the world.

Prophetic transformation begins with homiletic imagination. Don’t simply tell us what is. The “what is” is obvious. Tell us “what may be.” Evil forces are trying to constrict us to the narrow confines of “what is.” As a preacher, you serve as a creative, co-conspirator with God. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to conduct a sanctified *coup d’état* against the

tight spaces of our “is-ness.” Preacher, widen the boundaries of our “is-ness” so that we might walk in some mind-blowing, imagination-stretching newness.

In his classic work, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann rightly insists that many of us don’t believe in newness. Brueggemann asserts:

*It is the task of the prophet to bring to expression the new realities against the more visible ones of the old order....We are energized not by that which we already possess but by that which is promised and about to be given....If there is any point at which most of us are...co-opted, it is in this way. We do not believe that there will be newness....*<sup>xii</sup>

As people darken our doors and sit in our sanctuaries, they are sick and tired of the oppression of the old order. They want to know from us if there is any newness that might break in on their “is-ness.” Imaginative sermons are homiletic evidence that heaven can and will provide freshness, vitality, newness. We are called to move people beyond there is-ness to what *may be*. One vehicle for moving people is homiletic imagination.

When speaking of homiletic imagination, I must mention the inimitable Dr. Samuel Dewitt Proctor, a wizard of sacred words, who understood the power of imagination to widen the boundaries of the soul and the society. In his memoir *The Substance of Things Hoped For*, Dr. Proctor spoke about the importance of the subjunctive mood in his childhood. The subjunctive is the grammatical mood for imagining possibilities. Dr. Proctor remarked:

*When I was still too young for school Grandma took me along to her classroom at the Cumberland Street School where I sat in awe watching her teach. Believe me no one acted up in Mrs. Proctor’s classroom. All of her friends and colleagues seemed to share the same secret: they had a mission and a destiny to meet. They spoke to us children in the subjunctive mood—not what is, but what may be, when our faith flowered into reality.*<sup>xiii</sup>

As we discuss prophetic ministry in difficult times, Dr. Proctor’s words concerning the subjunctive mood are timely; for the subjunctive depicts possibilities. In light of Dr. Proctor’s celebration of the subjunctive mood, I offer a portable definition of homiletic imagination: Homiletic imagination is *paying attention* to *what is* for the sake of *what may be*. The definition is so simple that you might miss it if you don’t...*pay attention*. This is precisely the issue. One of the reasons we are not as creative as we might be is that we are not as attentive as we can be.

Paying attention is a spiritual discipline. There is no secret formula for paying attention other than paying attention, with all your senses intensely engaged. When is the last time you paid attention? Did you really pay attention to the pulsating vein on the wrinkled right hand of the seasoned deacon of your church when he was in the Intensive Care Unit? Did you really pay attention to the hint of nutmeg and cinnamon in the burnt orange, candied yams you ate the other day? Did you really pay attention to that dissonant 7<sup>th</sup> chord in a movie soundtrack that interrupted the harmonious plot development? Did you really notice the amazing aroma of the purples pansies perfuming the air in your neighbor’s garden?

Speaking of purple, in *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker places on the lips of Shug wonderful words of wisdom and caution for us preachers. Shug says:

*Listen, God love everything you love, and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything else, God loves admiration. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it. People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see God always trying to please us back.*

Now, preacher, here you are pacing the floor on Saturday night, angry with God, talking about, "Lord, I don't know what to preach, and I can't get a creative idea." And at the same time, God is pacing the floor in heaven, angry with you, saying, "Why didn't that fool pay attention to all the sermon material I showed him during the week?"

Preachers, pay attention. There is a Jewish proverb that says, "On the Day of Judgment, God will only ask one question: 'Did you enjoy my world?'"<sup>xiv</sup> Paying attention is a method for enjoying the world and enriching your preached word.

### **Flexing Your Imagination Muscles**

I will present now a few practices that will enable preachers to flex their muscles of imagination. The first exercise is the *short story exercise*. I encourage preachers to take a creative short story like those found in Donald Hays book *Stories: Contemporary Short Southern Fiction*. After reading the short story, preachers should re-tell the story to a family member or colleague in three minutes without the aid of notes while being timed with a stopwatch. The exercise will strengthen your ability to convey large amounts of creative details in a short period of time.

It also will compel you to be precise, and this will enrich your creativity. The Bible is an inexhaustible piece of literature, and on a weekly basis, preachers must learn how to select with precision the most relevant details to support their work. Far too many preachers flunk on Sundays because of imprecision. In attempting to do too much, many preachers actually accomplish very little in the pulpit. Thus, preachers need to know that often the little details make for the best and biggest sermons.

Second is the *genre exercise*. By genre, I simply mean the format your sermon will take. For example, will it be a story, poetry as in some of the Psalms, or a running exposition of the text? As you interpret your scripture and write your sermon, ask yourself this question, is there another creative format to convey the good news in this text? In my own preaching, I have found that letters are one of the most creative sermon forms. So, I occasionally write a sermon as a letter. For example, this past Mother's Day, my sermon was entitled, "A Mother's Day Message from Hagar." The sermon was a Fed-Ex letter that Hagar sent to the mothers in my church because she was not able to make the long journey from Egypt to New York, since Ishmael was so young.

The third exercise is the *illustration interrogation*. When you come across a good illustration, ask yourself what is the text that goes with this illustration.<sup>xv</sup> For example, there is a wonderful illustration on the African American Lectionary website from Dr. Charles Adams, Pastor of the Hartford Memorial Baptist Church and Professor at Harvard Divinity School. The illustration goes like this:

*CNN recently featured a story about how a poor, black woman saved enough money to purchase herself a home in Silicon Valley.... In an effort to get unwanted people out the neighborhood, the neighborhood association got together with the local bank and established a law that allowed a home to be foreclosed if the owner did not pay their association dues. For some reason or another, the black lady did not pay her \$200 dues. As a result the bank foreclosed on her house and sold her house which was worth over \$100,000 for \$10,000 to two white lawyers....*

*She became homeless and had no place to go. Though she was homeless, CNN showed the woman in church that Sunday praising God. She danced up a storm. She danced so until her dancing disturbed the minds of nine brilliant lawyers. The lawyers took her cause to court and they got her property restored. Whatever the situation, when you can't do anything else, you praise the Lord. Heaven can decipher what you need and take it from there.<sup>xvi</sup>*

After reading this illustration, the question would be: what are some texts that go with this illustration? It should not take us long to realize that one workable text would be Romans 8:26: "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express" (NIV). Or we could use Philippians 4:11: "For I have learned in whatever state I am in to be content" (NKJV). Or we could use 1 Thessalonians 5:18: "Give thanks in all circumstances" (NRSV). When a great illustration comes, log it in your mind and in a notebook or computer, and then ask yourself, what text goes with this illustration? Not only will this process provide you a ready-made supply of sermon ideas, but it also will strengthen the mental muscles of your imagination.

Fourth is the *preaching without words exercise*. This exercise seeks to tap into the crucial nonverbal elements of preaching. If the gospel is truly good news, we should allow not only our mouths but also our entire bodies to share in its proclamation. Thus, I regularly encourage preachers to investigate ways that gestures and movement can aid and, at times, even replace the spoken word in a sermon.

Let me offer an example. Once I was preaching a revival in Chicago. The sermon that night was about God's abundance based on John 10:10, where Jesus says that he has come that we might have life and life more abundantly. As I hit my stride in my celebratory conclusion, I recognized that this was a great time to let my body do what even my words could not. So, in the conclusion I said:

*Years ago in the Sunday School Choir, we sang a song entitled "Running Over." "Running over, running over, my cup is full and running over." As we sang, we gestured with our little hands. We continually twirled one hand over the other. This gesture symbolized the fullness of God's gifts spilling over the rim of our cups. As I close this message, let me go back to my childhood. My hands want to join my tongue in celebrating our abundance. "Running over, running over, my cup is full and running over."*

For a while, I was saying the words and doing the gestures, and then as I started shouting down the aisle, my hands said to my tongue, "You've done your part; you can rest now...let us take it higher from here." So I stopped saying the words and started doing the gesture repeatedly.

And with every twirl of my hands, the praise in the sanctuary got higher and higher until a blessed bedlam broke out.

I know the gesture had connected not simply because a shout broke out. But after service, the church raised an offering, and they had a particular financial goal they wanted to meet. After the offering had been lifted and counted, the Chair of the Deacon Board stood up to report that the goal had been reached, but he didn't say any words. He used his hands to replicate the gesture in my sermon conclusion, and the praise broke out once again in the congregation.

When preparing a sermon, ask yourself this question: how can my *body* get in on the good news? Often a gesture can zoom your sermon to a place your mere words cannot.

These are a few practices that can enliven your creativity, so that God can widen the boundaries of people's tight situations through your homiletic imagination. Whenever we widen the boundaries of people's blessings, we imitate Jesus. If there was a theme in Jesus' prophetic ministry, it was widening the boundaries. In Matthew 9:32-34, the crowd brought to Jesus a person who was possessed by a mute, demonic spirit. As a result of the mute spirit, the person couldn't speak because that person also probably couldn't hear. As I conclude my lecture, I wonder if there is some preacher here today possessed by a "mute" spirit. Sunday morning is on the way, and it feels like you can't speak because you can't hear. You've turned your ear toward heaven, but you haven't heard anything yet; and since you haven't heard anything, you can't say anything.

Is there anybody here who knows about the mute spirit? Have you ever been way down yonder by yourself on a Saturday night or early on a Sunday morning, and you couldn't hear nobody pray? It's a terrible thing to be unable to speak because you can't hear.

But God sent me to tell you that Jesus specializes in driving out mute spirits. Jesus pulled a prescription from the hem of his garment and exorcised the demon from that person. With the demon gone, that person could hear and speak again. After the person's hearing and speaking were restored, the crowd spoke these words: "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel." In other words, when Jesus shows up, the boundaries of a blessing are widened; the parameters of the possible are enlarged; new frontiers of freedom are established.

As you leave this conference and return to your place of service, my prayer for you is that Jesus will drive out any mute spirit in you that is hindering your homiletic imagination. I pray that Jesus will heal your "third ear"—the inner ear of your heart that lets you listen to homiletic melodies from heaven. I pray that Jesus will cut loose your stammering tongue so that you can tell an impoverished world about the unsearchable riches of God.

Most of all, I pray that when Jesus preaches through your emancipated imagination, the people will say:

"We ain't seen nothing like this ever before in...Atlanta, Baltimore, and Chicago."

"We ain't seen nothing like this ever before in... Denver, El Paso, and Fort Lauderdale."

"We ain't seen nothing like this ever before in...Greensboro, Hampton, and Indianapolis."



“We ain’t seen nothing like this ever before in... Jackson, Kalamazoo, and Los Angeles.”  
“We ain’t seen nothing like this ever before in... Memphis, New York, and Orlando.”

I don’t have time to call out every city. So, fill in your city, you know where you live! And wherever you live, may the people say as you preach, “We ain’t never...ever...seen nothing like this ever before! Amen.

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### Notes

<sup>i</sup> Terence Freitheim, *Genesis in the New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 342.

<sup>ii</sup> By using idiomatic expressions, I attempt to model the playfulness with language that generates homiletic creativity. For example, God “tripping” on God’s creativity is a poetic way of indicating the sheer delight that God experienced in the act of creating. Preachers, especially those formally educated in colleges and seminaries, need to move regularly beyond the restrictions of formal language and deliver sermons in language that is colorful and accessible.

<sup>iii</sup> “Jam, o jam, jam, Jesus, jam for me” is my “homiletic re-mix” that adapts lyrics from a popular 1988 Hip Hop song “Teddy’s Jam” by the musical group Guy. The use of this song to accentuate a theological point blurred the boundaries between the “sacred” and the “secular” and produced a palpable, positive response from the audience.

<sup>iv</sup> Genesis 2:3 (NRSV).

<sup>v</sup> Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 1-45.

<sup>vi</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>vii</sup> Tonya Bolden, *Rock of Ages: A Tribute to the Black Church* (New York: Dell Dragonfly Books, 2001), 8-9.

<sup>viii</sup> Zora Neale Hurston recorded many of the folk idioms of the early black church in *The Sanctified Church: The Folklore Writings of Zora Neale Hurston* (Berkeley: Turtle Island Foundation, 1981).

<sup>ix</sup> William A. Jones, Jr., “God on the Left Hand.” Sermon preached at the Hampton Ministers’ Conference, Hampton, Virginia. 1986. Cassette.

<sup>x</sup> For a useful overview of the role of imagery in preaching, consult Richard L. Eslinger, *The Web of Preaching: New Options in Homiletical Method* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 246-287.

<sup>xi</sup> Quoted in Cornel West and Kelvin Shawn Sealey, *Restoring Hope: Conversations on the Future of Black America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 4.

<sup>xii</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 14.

<sup>xiii</sup> Samuel DeWitt Proctor, *The Substance of Things Hoped For: A Memoir of African-American Faith* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), 17 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>xiv</sup> Esther De Wall, *Lost in Wonder: Rediscovering the Spiritual Art of Attentiveness* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003), 72.

<sup>xv</sup> Linda L. Clader, *Voicing the Vision: Imagination and Prophetic Preaching* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2003), 18.

<sup>xvi</sup> [www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/sermon.asp](http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/sermon.asp). Accessed June 1, 2009.