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“*Ephobounto gar*: Fear, Wisdom, and the Homiletical-Theological Task of Speaking Gospel in Crisis Situations”

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“Succinctly put, homiletical theology is the exercise of practical wisdom”

Alyce McKenzie

One of the most important features of Alyce McKenzie’s contribution to the field is her insistence on drawing deeply on the traditions of wisdom for preaching and relating that steadfastly to the work of homiletics as practical theology. Prof. McKenzie’s work in this regard has been both deep and wide. I wish here to engage this significant part of her research agenda by carrying it forward.

I am relating the two, wisdom traditions and the notion of homiletical theology as practical wisdom in an admittedly arbitrary way: the importance of the “fear of the Lord” as the *beginning* of all wisdom (Prov 9:10) and the problem of traumatic “fear” posed by preaching in crisis situations.¹ I do not wish to muddle the difference between theological and anthropological fear, but I am convinced that the exercise of practical wisdom in the midst of crisis situations is important for preacher and homiletician alike. The path I wish to take to help unpack these issues is therefore both scriptural and theological. I begin by describing the odd, traumatic ending of Mark’s Gospel in the stunningly brief resurrection material of 16:1-8 that end with the Greek words “*ephobounto gar*,” or, “for they were afraid.” I then turn to Serene Jones’ work in *Trauma and Grace* to reread the Markan ending in light of trauma theory. In the final part of this article I turn to the problem of preaching in situations of crisis and propose, what I hope, are suitably wise and fitting theologically-laden practices so that even the

¹ I first developed this paper in connection with a paper presented at the 2018 meeting of *Societas Homiletica*, whose theme was “Fearing God in a Fear-Filled World,” held at Duke Divinity School in early August. I wish to thank my international colleagues in homiletics whose responses helped to improve this paper along the way!

homiletical-theological task of preaching in crisis is itself understood as an exercise in practical wisdom.

Fearing the End with Mark's Gospel

The Gospel of Mark ends disturbingly in the Greek New Testament. According to text-critical scholars, the Gospel's most likely ending is at 16:8 with the women at the tomb running away, saying nothing, "for they were afraid." The ending surprises us because it does not appear to us to be how a gospel should end. As contemporary preachers, we may sometimes be tempted to read Mark in light of Matthew, Luke, and perhaps even John, all of whom have more than just an "empty tomb" scene and an expression of fear, but include commissions, appearances, and any number of post-resurrection narratives of the risen Jesus. This reception history from the canon all the way to today is precisely what makes it so hard for us to grasp Mark's uniqueness here. If indeed Mark is the oldest of the four gospels, the truth of this unique ending seems even more startling given its place in the tradition. Mark, the oldest Gospel, does not wrap up his story with a happy ending at 16:8, but concludes with the puzzling words about the women who told no one anything, *ephobounto gar*, for they were afraid.

A gospel ending with fear does not seem to have been satisfying to the tradition. If the synoptic hypothesis is correct, Matthew and Luke intervened fairly early in the process by adding to Mark's bare-bones ending of the empty tomb tradition. What perhaps is even more telling, however, is the way that subsequent manuscripts of Mark seem to be trying to correct Mark's mysterious ending. For this reason, readers of English translations of Mark that honor this manuscript tradition add bracketed material as well as vv. 9-20, called the "intermediate ending" and the "longer ending" respectively. It appears that the manuscript tradition itself

struggled with Mark's ending which features the verb "to fear" and concludes, uncharacteristically, with the conjunction *gar*.

Contemporary interpreters have tried to work around Mark's fearful ending in their own ways. Some argue that a more happy ending is implied. Since we know that the Gospel got to us readers, we can trust that the women eventually did the right thing and actually told the disciples so the Gospel's gospel could be carried forward. Other interpreters focus on the reader's role and argue that where characters in the narrative itself fear and fail, the readers of Mark's Gospel have insight that the characters in the narrative do not possess and therefore have the task of completing the narrative laid in their laps—the readers finish the narrative that most of the main characters fail to comprehend. Here, the knowing reader, now an insider to the Markan narrative, provides in a reader-response fashion a more appropriate ending to Mark's Gospel.

The point here is not to inventory all the possible endings of Mark, happy or not. The intent is, rather, to identify the constructive homiletical-theological problem at the heart of Christian faith in a time of profound fear, grief, and perhaps even trauma. In fact, I wish to show how this problem in the tradition emerges as an occasion that helps us think about our task as wise homiletical theologians and the fearful context in which early Christian texts struggle to speak from the beginning.

Recalling the Beginning of Mark's Gospel

One reason that Mark's ending is so strange has to do with the careful framing at the very beginning of the Gospel. Mark 1:1 functions like a superscription for the work: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ." Mark's Gospel may be mostly a story. Here, at the beginning, however the Gospel indicates that is about the "gospel," *tou euangeliou* and aligns

that gospel with Jesus Christ.² Mark signals clearly to readers that his Gospel is about the gospel. By the end of the introductory material in 1:14-15, Mark returns to the theme of the gospel, but now places the word in Jesus' mouth as he emerges from his wilderness temptation triumphant and ready to begin his ministry of healing, exorcism, and feeding. The gospel in vv. 14-15, which Jesus announces, is now specifically called "the gospel of God," and is aligned with Jesus' proclamation of the divine reign. From the beginning Mark's Gospel names the gospel as both Jesus Christ and the gospel of God's reign.

It is the juxtaposition of this clear beginning and muddled ending that raises the key question. Why does the first of the Gospels make such a strong opening claim and conclude with a confusing, tragic ending? How can a Gospel about the gospel end like this?

A Deeper Wisdom: Serene Jones and the Ends of the Gospel

In light of this very theological way of putting the question, it becomes quite interesting to look at the work of Serene Jones in her book, *Trauma and Grace*.³ Jones likewise notes the disruptive ending of the Gospel of Mark, but rereads it through embodied experiences of trauma.⁴ Trauma does not admit easy endings; in fact, trauma has the tendency to return. Similarly, in Mark the awful event of the cross is not resolved in the brief references to resurrection in 16:1-8. It is a troubling, unfinished Gospel of the gospel.

Jones first notes that the word "end" has two meanings. It speaks of course to the notion of a conclusion—that is true. But the language of "end" in English carries another meaning of

² I use the capitalized word Gospel to designate Mark's work; and the lower-case word "gospel" to describe the theological message that Mark's Gospel is concerned with.

³ Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville: WJKP, 2009), 87-96. What follows is my summary of this portion of Jones' work.

⁴ Trauma theory has begun to impact North American homiletics in profound ways. Dr. Kimberly Wagner's 2018 Emory dissertation deals with preaching, trauma theory, and the problem of gun violence in the US, see "From the Depths: Preaching in Wake of Mass Violent Trauma." In a regional Ted Talk from 2017, Boston University homiletics PhD student Nikki Young offers a summary of the impact of "collective trauma" in and across cultures: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4a7Aj2_JIoI&list=PLsRN0Ux8w3rP2RrF1Os6CbDhfudvRMRyR&index=2. Accessed August 3, 2018.

theological weight: end as *purpose*. In light of this, Jones asks what is the end (purpose) of this Gospel about the gospel of the cross? Such purpose, she notes, is not just a once-and-for-all reality, but one that can and does break into our lives this side of our ultimate end (the first sense). In this way, it is almost analogous to an understanding of healing that does not limit itself to a completed act, but an ongoing one that emerges from time to time in the present. In this way, Jones asks a crucial question: “how [might we] tell stories about violence that...bear witness to God’s forming grace and mercy?”

Along the way, Jones notes that the fear expressed in the final verse, *ephobounto gar*, is not the only testimony to its reality. The alarm that the women experience, and from which the angel tries to dissuade them, is also a verb of great fear (*exethambêthêsan* in 16:5, 6 [note to editor: I had to put a macron instead of a circumflex above the e’s here in my transliteration—I am hoping you are able to correct this]). The women’s fear is thus such that they are frightened into speechlessness. This, for Jones, tends to underline the importance of Mark’s missing ending for those experiencing trauma. Mark’s Gospel of the gospel has no ordered closure; nor does it press toward some sort of compensatory understanding. It ends in its own unraveled way. It fails to make theological meaning in any of the senses we would expect.

Jones notes two ways that this actually fits the situation of those who have been traumatized, for whom fear is a returning reality without easy closure. A narrative that has such holes in it, a narrative that does not press toward an ordered ending actually fits the experience of those who have undergone trauma. Trauma in this sense inhabits the body, its muscle memory, and is not easily disposed of by feats of narrative closure. Such open-ended narrative may thereby offer a more fitting aesthetic. Second, if the nature of this trauma is to alarm and terror into silence, perhaps an unusual narrative like Mark’s opens up a space for renewed agency on

the part of those who live in such fear. Jones even goes on to emphasize that Mark's ending could possibly open up into performances of unspoken gestures—indeed, perhaps silent gesture is the only way to open up meaning in the face of such fear.

An Exercise of Homiletical Theology for Preaching in Crisis Situations

For me, this kind of constructive-theological work goes beyond the exegetical questions surrounding the interpretation of Mark's ending. The question with which Jones wrestles is, at heart, a profound issue of what I call homiletical theology. Homiletical theology views preaching as a place where theology is done. It is, as Alyce McKenzie notes, “an exercise of practical wisdom.”⁵ For those who preach in situations of crisis, such moments confront preachers in ever new ways, and in ever new contexts.⁶ What do preachers say when situations unravel and escape any attempt at the theological ordering that is a happy ending? What is the gospel for those moments? Homiletical theologians in such moments will draw on the riches of scripture, but they will also need to name in the midst of what are actually local silences, fears, and terrors which the scriptures sometimes only intimate. How might we speak and gesture toward gospel in the face of this situational unraveling?

⁵ Alyce McKenzie, “The Company of Sages: Homiletical Theology as a Sapiential Hermeneutic” in *Homiletical Theology: Preaching as Doing Theology* (D. S. Jacobsen, ed.; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 88.

⁶ Homileticians in North America have begun to wrestle with crisis preaching as a specific preaching moment: Joseph Jeter, Jr.'s book *Crisis Preaching: Personal and Public* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) and Samuel Proctor's *Preaching about Crises in the Community* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1988) are excellent examples of this. Ron Allen has named the theological significance of preaching in such moments more broadly in his work *Preaching the Topical Sermon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992). I am doing something similar in picking up elements of David Buttrick's “situational preaching” in relation to his “preaching in the mode of praxis,” in *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) while relating it to Ed Farley's work on relating a theology of gospel to practice and unpacking the notion of a “hermeneutic of situations,” both of which are treated in his *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003). I have ventured my own thoughts on preaching in crisis situations in connection with my work with Robert Kelly in *Kairos Preaching: Speaking Gospel to the Situation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 124-50.

At the center of what I call homiletical theology is a confessional-correlational process that includes what André Resner calls a “working gospel.”⁷ In a situation of crisis, which we are proposing to relate to Jones’ reflections on cross and resurrection in trauma, preachers as theologians bring into conversation gospel and context. Part of what Jones offers, I believe, is a sense of the asymmetry of preaching gospel in such crisis situations: the limits of understanding and knowledge, the halting and unfinished nature of the conversation crisis engenders, and the proximity of all this to bodies in whom fear and trauma are inscribed. Strange as it may sound, I think that Jones helps to reframe the task of preaching in situations of crisis in at least three helpful ways.

1. “Returning” to a Theology of the Cross

Jones highlights the importance of “returning” to trauma and relates it to the uniquely Markan take on cross and resurrection. I am proposing that we take the notion of returning and use it in reference to a theology of the cross that both exercises its critical function and yet is in itself revisable in crisis preaching. Luther’s notion of a theology of the cross differs somewhat from more recent struggles over the cross chiefly in relation to atonement theory. For Luther a theology of the cross “calls a thing what it really is.”⁸ It relates much more closely to a theology of revelation in a kind of cruciform key, as Douglas John Hall describes it.⁹ In Luther’s formulation it parts ways with a theology of glory that associates divine revelation with exalted forms of human power, and looks instead at weakness—assuming that God reveals Godself in

⁷ André Resner developed the notion of “working gospel” in an insightful article, “Reading the Bible for Preaching the Gospel,” *Collected Papers of the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Academy of Homiletics*, 223. Since then, Resner has expanded his approach to a more explicitly apocalyptic understanding of gospel in *Living In-Between: Lament, Justice, and the Persistence of the Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015).

⁸ Martin Luther deals with this notion in the Heidelberg Disputation. Gerhard Foerde treats it in great detail in his book *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997)

⁹ Douglas John Hall offers a uniquely Canadian perspective on the anti-triumphalism of Luther’s theology of the cross in North America in *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.

the cross *sub contrario*. Precisely as a critical principle, a theology of the cross may just be wise for responding to the trauma-centered theology that Jones articulates. At the same time, there is even with a theology of the cross a reductionistic tendency that struggles to see ways in which cross and power intersect and thus invite further critical revision for our homiletical-theological task of speaking gospel in crisis. Deanna Thompson and other feminist theologians make a case for a revision of a theology of the cross in light of women's suffering.¹⁰ More recently, James Cone argues that the Black community's experience of lynching both critiques and enlarges that theology by juxtaposing the cross with the lynching tree.¹¹

The homiletical goal is not to apply cross language willy-nilly. Instead it invites preachers into practical wisdom in the form of an act of discernment to explore both how the cross refuses the evasions that misname and thus erase trauma as well as to see how an experience of trauma itself pushes back on our preaching of the cross. A view of "returning" to a theology of the cross may just permit preaching in crisis situations to connect more deeply to the embodied contradictions of the tradition in a way that allows preachers and hearers to bear halting, difficult witness to one another.

2. God Preached and God Not Preached

An important piece of the exercise of wisdom for preaching in situations of crisis is to acknowledge what human beings do and do not know. Trauma, as Jones points out, has a way of leaving those impacted silenced and terrorized. Crisis, likewise, opens up the possibility *in situ* that we cannot yet say all that might be said. It becomes a moment where preachers need to be

¹⁰ Some recent examples are Mary Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge: A Feminist Proposal for an Epistemology of the Cross* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997); Marit Trelstad, Ed., *Cross Examinations: Readings of the Meaning of the Cross Today* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006); and Deanna Thompson, *Crossing the Divide: Luther, Feminism and the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004).

¹¹ James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011).

honest about what they know and do not know. “For now,” says Paul, “we see through a glass, darkly” (1 Cor 13:12 KJV).

In light of these contextual and situational realities, Luther’s notion of God preached and not preached may offer a partial way of thinking through the limits of our homiletical-theological task. In response to the speculative tendencies of some late Medieval theology, Luther is careful to distinguish between what we can say about God and what we cannot.¹² Holding tightly to divine mystery, Luther recognizes that God cannot simply be explained by what we know and can say. In the face of this mystery, however, Luther holds to the notion of God’s disclosure in Christ, to what we can know and say about God. For Luther, our talk of God must acknowledge its limits.

Although going beyond Luther’s formulation, an appreciation as well for the mystery of otherness that we encounter in humanity in all its diversity should give occasion for homiletical-theological modesty when preaching in situations of crisis. Jones reminds us that the traumatized can find themselves re-traumatized in Christian preaching. Is there a theological-anthropological corollary to Luther’s notion, now enlarged by what we learn about our differences in a world where the exclusion of trauma is arbitrarily applied across populations? Perhaps a more nuanced, wise approach to humanity in crisis can help us see proclamation as not simply a re-inscribing of the tradition, regardless of our fears, but a more fragmentary offering that freely acknowledges what we know, and what we do not know, in the face of crisis.

3. Preaching in Crisis: From Deductive and Inductive to “Abductive” Invention

Preaching sometimes structures its discourse by means of inventional logics that help to order life in light of gospel. Models of deductive and inductive preaching have, at various

¹² You can find a helpful summary of Luther’s thought again with the work of Gerhard Foerde in *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 15-17.

points, vied for influence, especially in the late-twentieth-century North American pulpit.¹³

However, neither the inductive nor deductive path may be the most useful for the kind of crisis preaching that experiences of trauma may be helping us to revision.

American pragmatist philosopher Charles Peirce mentions a third possibility, an “abductive” logic or mode of inference and thus adds it to the traditional Aristotelian deductive and inductive modes. Peirce uses the term to signify a kind of reasoning that ventures a hypothesis and tests it. For Peirce, abductive reasoning joins inductive and deductive as the third kind of logical inference. Of course, some have critiqued Peirce for including abductive reasoning, especially since it appears to be more a form of explanation of a theory already held. For Peirce, however, abduction does not belong to justifying an already ventured theory, but is rather a form of discovery capable of generating new theories.

Admittedly, the rather abstract language of logical inference in relation to homiletical invention does not at first blush seem readily usable for the fearful, traumatic situations of crisis we have been assuming. However, its generative approach may just prove helpful for a homiletical theology that views its task constructively! Using Jones’ work, therefore, I wish to flesh out a further meaning of Peirce’s abduction not only as an idealized form of reasoning, but a more metaphorically embodied gesture in view of the admitted shattering of meaning in a situation. Jones envisions an embodied gesture as the “end” (in the second sense) of Mark’s Gospel in interpretation.¹⁴ My goal is to show how abductive invention in a sermon might embody metaphorically a way about preaching gospel in moments of public crisis.

¹³ A helpful summary of these in situational or topical preaching is found in Ron Allen’s work, *Preaching the Topical Sermon* (Louisville: WJKP, 1992). While not advocating for any particular inventional logic for preaching, Prof. McKenzie’s own work on homiletical theology as an exercise in practical wisdom argues that it represents a kind of sapiential hermeneutic in an inductive mode, *Homiletical Theology*, 87-102. It may be that preaching in crisis sometimes leads us to the edge of the deductive and inductive logics by which we live and come to an understanding about a situation.

¹⁴ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 94-95.

One reason I particularly revel in the use of “abductive” for this type of reasoning is its secondary use as a term in relation to muscle movement. Abductor muscles are muscles in the body that enable movement away from the median of the body. If, say, you stand with your arms at your side and proceed to draw (-duct) them up away from your body (ab-) to take a cruciform shape, for example, you would, bio-mechanically speaking, be engaging in a kind of abduction.

I have therefore fleshed out a kind of playful revision of the term of inference, “abductive,” to describe a kind of “embodied” theological structure for situational preaching in crises. Although abductive reasoning acknowledges its all too fragmentary knowledge, nonetheless it aims provisionally to gesture toward truth-- even if only piecemeal--as a kind of hypothesis. To put this into sermonic context, I would like to imagine an analogous situation to help embody this kind of practical wisdom at work in abductive invention.

In the midst of X (facts of crisis) there is Y (God not preached) we do not know.¹⁵
However, we can hold on to Z (God preached).

Therefore, Z points us forward in the midst of ambiguity.

The logical structure above on its own is conceivable given our reflections, but it is its truly embodied intentional counterpart below that makes it *plausible* as a homiletical-theological exercise in wisdom in a *traumatic*, crisis situation. There are, no doubt, some things in moments of trauma that the body knows: the knot in the stomach, the desire to step back, or a feeling of detachment or numbness in an almost out of body experience (think of how preaching in a crisis can make preachers feel tongue-tied!). Metaphorically, then, I liken the abductive kind of homiletical-theological inference to a sermon that:

¹⁵ This first step is important not only for acknowledging the facts of a difficult situation, but our realization about what we do *not* know about God in relation to it. Perhaps, with Socrates as portrayed in Plato’s Apology, we can argue that wisdom also consists in knowing what we do not know.

*names the shattered glass in a situation,
picks up a shard,
and juxtaposing it bodily holds it up to the light.*

To long for gospel in a deep awareness of the body's response, and present to that longing, naming gospel, even if only piecemeal, as a kind of risked hypothesis in its very presence. Such abductive preaching in crisis is difficult in that it takes place precisely in the midst of broken glass and vulnerable bodies. But crisis preaching is nonetheless a place where we are called and empowered to name gospel, even if only provisionally and in all too broken ways. In this way, to paraphrase Prof. McKenzie, homiletical theology may just also be an occasion for the *bodily* exercise of practical wisdom.

DRAFT

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