Abstract

Preaching in the Digital Era:
Options, Choices and Methods of Feedback

By

The Rev. Stephen Bradley Smith

In an era of rapidly changing and expanding media options, the way we communicate in the United States is going through. Meanwhile, in the midst of this digital age preaching remains largely an exclusively oral medium. This project will examine options for integrating media options into the task of preaching.

It will present a four-fold methodology to help a preacher move beyond his or her current limits of style and content. First, a written project will describe the cultural context and the congregational context in which we find ourselves. With material from Shane Hipps, Tony Jones, Fred Craddock, Dianna Butler Bass, and Walter Ong, I will examine the rapidly changing media landscape in which we find ourselves and the ways in which it may affect the task of preaching. Citing Hipps, Reuel Howe, Dianna Butler Bass, and Craddock, I will look at how this changing media landscape impacts the congregational context of preaching (i.e., how preaching takes place in a community, not just as the task of the preacher alone).

In the second section I will present options. I will list and describe the forms of oral preaching delineated by Wesley Allen, Jr. I will cite the work of Thomas Troeger and Edward Everding on appealing to multiple intelligences. I’ll provide excerpts from
interviews with Tony Jones, Shane Hipps and a fellow preacher Paul St. Germain that describe how they undertake the preaching process. I will offer options for dramatic presentations as sermons from Tom Long and Friends of the Groom drama troupe, and present some suggestions from fellow preacher George Glazier who occasionally uses what he calls “the offering plate sermon.”

In the third section I will describe the congregational context in which I serve, and how it has developed into a community where a number of these options are put into practice. Not only will I offer a brief history of that movement, but I will also provide quotes from a videotaped feedback session with a select, multi-generational group from the congregation. I will also provide an internet link to the complete video.

In the final section I will present three sets of sermons. In each set the first sermon is from a previous era of my ministry and found in text/oral form. The second sermon in each set reflects on the same lessons but utilizes some form of media other than just the spoken word. In this section I will describe the intent and reason for the uses of extra media and provide comments (received by email) from the same feedback group in section three. The emails will provide feedback as to whether or not the introduction of additional media actually made a difference in hearing the message of the Gospel.

In conclusion, I will offer a summary of the effect of rapidly changing media on preaching from the perspective of my congregational context and the means by which a preacher may respond.
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By

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I have served three congregations as rector. In each case some members left the church within the first year and a subset of that group cited my preaching as the reason. Granted, some transition in membership always manifests itself in the first or second year of a new pastorate. But the references to preaching sparked my interest.

One person, leaving the first church I served as rector, said my sermons were too intellectual. Another said I did not speak enough to contemporary issues. In a different church a member left because I read my sermons from the pulpit. In still another church, when I changed my usual delivery from reading sermons from the pulpit to extemporaneous sermons in the aisle, a member said my preaching had “dumbed down” the Gospel. Other feedback I’ve received from both those who left and those who stayed in the churches I served included:

“You’re too political,”

“You need to talk more about Jesus,”

“Why do you tell so many stories, can’t you just tell us what the Bible passages mean?”

“Your sermons are too long, just tell us Jesus loves us; that’s what our former pastor did and his sermons were never longer than 5 minutes.”

“I really like it when you portray a character from one of the Bible stories and use drama. Can’t you do that every week?”

Such comments reveal as much about the commentator as about my preaching, if not more. But they highlight the reality that preaching takes place within a context—the
congregation and the culture from which the congregation comes. If even 50 people hear a sermon on a given Sunday they listen through a myriad set of filters that include, but are not limited to, the style and content of previous preachers/pastors in that congregation, the individual’s preferred learning style, his or her personality type, the political leanings of a listener, the (often) age-related bias toward media preferences, and the on-going quality of relationship between preacher and church member.

The congregation, however, exists within a context as well. A congregation in a working class town will hear a sermon differently than a small town, university town, or suburban Church. The individuals in a congregation are also affected by political leanings, which in turn are influenced by the news and world events around them. The wider context of information and how people access it will affect listening to sermons. Those who read newspapers, books and magazines for information may have a more linear pattern of listening, whereas those who access the internet for most of their information may want quick sound bytes of information in a variety of forms. The vast array of visual media available in our culture may lead people to expect sermons with visuals: props, or videos, or at least some level of physical movement.

In addition, we live in a consumer-oriented culture where even information and knowledge are treated as commodities to be packaged, marketed, and selected by consumers from a myriad of options. The fact that I received such a variety of comments about my preaching, as related above, demonstrates a consumerist mentality. People were searching for a style or content of preaching that fit with their expectations of what they wanted to select or “purchase” from the variety of styles and content available to them.
One preacher certainly cannot satisfy every desire for variety of forms and content in preaching. However, if we set a goal that the Gospel be heard by as many as possible then it behooves the preacher to consider forms, methods and content that he or she can competently use to convey the Gospel to as many people as possible, whether there are 50 at church on a given Sunday or 5000.

This project will examine how to make this possible. It will present a four-fold methodology to help a preacher move beyond his or her current limits of style and content. First, a written project will describe the cultural context and the congregational context in which we find ourselves. With material from Shane Hipps, Tony Jones, Fred Craddock, Dianna Butler Bass, and Walter Ong, I will examine the rapidly changing media landscape in which we find ourselves and the ways in which it may affect the task of preaching. Citing Hipps, Reuel Howe, Dianna Butler Bass, and Craddock, I will look at how this changing media landscape impacts the congregational context of preaching (i.e., how preaching takes place in a community, not just as the task of the preacher alone).

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In the third section I will describe the congregational context in which I serve, and how it has developed into a community where a number of these options are put into practice. Not only will I offer a brief history of that movement, but I will also provide quotes from a videotaped feedback session with a select, multi-generational group from the congregation. I will also provide an internet link to the complete video.

In the final section I will present three sets of sermons. In each set the first sermon is from a previous era of my ministry and found in text/oral form. The second sermon in each set reflects on the same lessons but utilizes some form of media other than just the spoken word. In this section I will describe the intent and reason for the uses of extra media and provide comments (received by email) from the same feedback group in section three. The emails will provide feedback as to whether or not the introduction of additional media actually made a difference in hearing the message of the Gospel.

In conclusion, I will offer a summary of the effect of rapidly changing media on preaching from the perspective of my congregational context and the means by which a preacher may respond. Communication theory is highly subjective. With the mass amount of media options available for receiving and sending communication personal preference affect the ability to communicate as much as anything else. However, I do believe we can track trends among the ways in which various people receive and process communication, even in their highly personal choices. I believe my project will reveal some of these trends in communication, especially among different age-groups, that may have a profound effect on preaching in the years to come.
In a set of final appendixes I will first outline how a rector can call together a small, multi-generational group in the congregation to help determine the boundaries of style and content in the community that he or she serves. A second appendix will describe putting together a regular congregational feedback group which may be able to help with sermon preparation, presentation and evaluation across time. Other appendices will provide examples of preaching other than my own, but used in the congregation I serve, and one of my sermons written as a parable of a popular movie, that have also responded to the rapidly-changing media landscape.
Part One—The Cultural and Congregational Context

The Culture

In the last 50 years, the cultural context of preaching has changed dramatically. Fifty years ago average Sunday attendance in the churches of the United States was near record levels. Most mainline clergy were well-trained at national seminaries, and equipped with the ability to make reasonable arguments on theological matters. The Sunday sermon was often topical and employed the reasoning power of the trained pastor. He (mostly) was considered to be the authority on theological matters after all, and the congregation respected that authority and listened. If the pastor learned anything in seminary about the art of preaching it often consisted of little more than training in speech and elocution.\(^1\) It was assumed the preacher already knew how to reason and make a case. What was needed was proper technique.

If, as Marshall McLuhan was so fond of saying, “the medium is the message,” then the message these sermons conveyed was, “I (the preacher) am the authority on theological matters and you have to listen to me to understand their meaning for your life.”

We no longer inhabit that world. As Diana Butler Bass pointed out in her book *Christianity after Religion*, the first decade of the 21\(^{st}\) century was the worst for institutional churches in the history of the United States.\(^2\) The decade began with the

\(^1\) Fred Craddock, *As one Without Authority* (Abingdon: Nashville, 1971) p. 3.
sexual abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church and got worse from there. Declines in attendance, giving and general commitment have left churches struggling and record numbers have shuttered their doors. In this context, the preacher has nowhere near the level of implicit authority of 50 years ago if, in fact, the preacher has any at all.

How did we get here? Shane Hipps, in his book, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* applies the communication theory of Marshall McLuhan to the cultural context of the Church. Hipps points out that three inventions of the 19th century changed the way we perceived reality and are still changing our world and worldview: the telegraph, the photograph, and radio.3

The telegraph created instant information. Events were no longer viewed as the unfolding drama of history but as unrelated occurrences seemingly happening at random. The photograph gave us lifelike, realistic views of the world that spoke volumes (as in a picture is worth a thousand words), making words less necessary. The radio gave us stories and drama that connected us more like a tribe. As Brian Swimme points out both the radio and TV have made us like our tribal ancestors. They sat around a fire and told stories and repeated chants to remind them who they were. We sit around the glow of the TV set and watch stories and hear the repeated chants of advertising to tell us who we are.4

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All these inventions experienced renovations over time that led from the telegraph to the telephone to email, texting and tweeting; from the photograph to television, movies and YouTube, from the radio to cell phones, to cable and satellite communication. And with a single handheld device all these functions can be immediately available to a single user in a single instant. And in so doing, historical context is eroded, words become less necessary, and tribal connections with those stored in a database (as opposed to neighborhood, church, community, nation, or world) become stronger. What has happened is, “our thinking patterns begin to mirror the specific form of media we use to communicate.”

So if we read books we want things to follow in linear order along a story-line or outline that makes sense. If we use the internet we think of life as multiple offerings of information, data and media, with little concern for what pattern or outline they follow.

What makes all of this so difficult for the Church is the pace with which things have changed. It has only been over the course of a few generations that we have moved from a more literary, book-bound world into this new digital age. So in a Church where people of all ages worship, the preacher may face the daunting challenge of speaking to three or four totally different kinds of audiences: the over 60 crowd, who might revel in a well-constructed, literary sermon that deftly uses irony and the turn of a phrase; the 40 to 60 crowd who grew up on sitcoms and would just love to hear a good story with a great moral; the under 40 crowd or MTV generation who want vivid images, emotionally laden

content and sound bytes that are memorable; and the youngest crowd of all, raised with
the internet, who may be sitting in the pews thinking, “Why are you still talking? When
do I get to talk? Why is this important?”\(^6\)

One of the struggles of the Church is that it has not adapted to this changed world,
but often resisted it. The Episcopal Church came into being at a time before all of these
inventions and innovations. The technology that gave rise to Anglicanism was the
printing press. It made the abstract idea of words created by phonetic letters accessible to
all people. And to adapt to this new technology the Church created the Book of Common
Prayer. It is linear, well organized, and steeped in the world of print media. It is
authoritative and institutional (approved by the Church). It is meant to be used by the
whole Church (common prayer). Therefore, it finds itself an anachronism in this digital
world.

In some ways so is preaching. As Tony Jones is fond of saying, “Nowhere in my
life do I listen to a 25-minute lecture without dialogue. Why would I voluntarily do it on
Sunday morning?”\(^7\) Perhaps one of the reasons we have so many Episcopal Churches
filled with people over 60 is because we have resisted changing our method of
communication. We hang on to the print media which appeals to an older generation and
ignore the media and communication forms used by younger people.

\(^6\) Shane Hipps, *Session 5 Episcopal Preaching Foundation National Preaching
Conference April 23-26, 2012* (Kanuga Conference Center Media) time stamp 5:00
\(^7\) An Interview with Tony Jones, web address:
Where do we go from here? What are we up against? As Hipps points out the glare of modern media gives us a “glut of disparate, often contradictory, and random data with no center or margin (and it) has begun to erode our belief in a meta-narrative. As a result, authority, truth, and meaning become difficult to discover and establish with clarity or certainty. It hasn’t taken long for people in current cultures to see the truth claims of Scripture as no more valid than the claims of Dr. Phil.”

In other words, not only are we behind the times in terms of using communication tools that may reach all generations, but the cultural context has so relativized all truth claims to the point of putting everything we may have to say in doubt. In a cultural context in which more than 90% of all scientists agree that we have irreversibly changed climate on the globe because of the production of greenhouse gases and deforestation, and at the same time 35% of the US population believes these scientists have falsified their research for political reasons and nearly half think only natural causes are affecting climate change, who has the right to speak with any authority? In such an environment where even scientific conclusions are questioned (which only a few short years ago were considered the most reliable of all information) who has any authority to speak and make any claims to truth?

So the second thing we need to do is dare to say the Church still has a claim to truth. Shane Hipps points out that if, as Marshall McLuhan said, the medium is the message, then the medium God uses to communicate to the world is Christ. And the

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8 Hipps, *Electronic Media*, p. 68
Church, by extension being the body of Christ, represents the on-going medium of God’s message. “If God’s chosen medium was Christ, and the church is the body of Christ, then the church is God’s chosen medium for God’s on-going revelation to the world; the church exists to embody and proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom. If the medium is the message, the message of the gospel is profoundly shaped by the way the church lives in the world.”\(^9\) We need to claim this calling.

What’s more, the dizzying pace of technological development and information overload call out for a means by which we can interpret it all. As communication theorist Walter Ong points out, “when a communications system, which works between persons through symbols, is overloaded with great masses of information, you create an urgent need for interpretation and hermeneutics.”\(^10\) The problem is the level of information available has grown exponentially and hermeneutics cannot catch up. People are so filled with knowledge about stuff, but not about what it means. They have been overloaded with information, without the context of communication, which implies relationship. The Church can be a place that offers just such a relationship of interpretation and meaning.

And finally, once we have fully accepted this challenge of communication we need to venture forth into the world the way it really is, rather than the way it was, dare to choose from all forms of communication available to us, and proclaim the truth as we know it.

\(^9\) *ibid*, p. 92.
After all, Christianity itself was founded in a process of changing technology: “the divine revelation which is the object of Christian theology was given within the process of technological development and reflects within itself this development.”

As far as we know Jesus wrote nothing down. He taught orally, through parables and stories. However, the only reason later generations even know about him is because early church leaders used the developing new technology of writing to put together what eventually became the Gospels. Our faith was born in a time of technological transition. It certainly has the potential to survive the one we currently inhabit.

“We are being invited to develop and hone the ancient skill of ‘navigating through an ever uncharted and unchartable’ culture. This skill is not developed through finding the right answers and locking onto fixed ideas but rather by having the courage and wisdom to ask the right questions at the right times and places.”

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12 Hipps, Electronic Media, p. 43.
The Congregational Context

Saying that “the church is God’s chosen medium for God’s on-going revelation to the world” and that we are called to have “the courage and wisdom to ask the right questions at the right times and places” does not make these things a reality. In addition to the cultural context in which we find ourselves, each congregation is its own community living out its own realities in relation to the world around it.

In the Episcopal Church we have a rich literary heritage in the Book of Common Prayer and we have a rich oral heritage in our preaching. In the late 1800s, Philips Brooks, of Trinity Episcopal Church, Boston, was considered one of the best preachers in American history. Even today Episcopalian Barbara Brown Taylor is an admired preacher and author.

The people who sit in our pews today are reflective of the culture in which we live. That culture has moved far beyond literary and oral traditions alone. So, as mentioned above, a preacher in a Church where people of all ages worship may face the daunting challenge of speaking to three or four totally different kinds of audiences: the over-60 crowd, who might revel in a well-constructed, literary sermon that deftly uses irony and the turn of a phrase; the 40-to-60 crowd who grew up on sitcoms and would just love to hear a good story with a great moral; the under-40 crowd who want vivid images and sound bytes that are memorable; and the youngest crowd of all, raised with the internet, who, as Shane Hipps says, may be sitting in the pews thinking, “Why are you still talking? When do I get to talk? Why is this important?”

13 Hipps, Session 5 time stamp 5:00.
This creates the potential for extreme barriers in communication. As long ago as 1967, Reuel Howe was already sensing these cultural shifts and spoke of significant barriers to communication for the preacher in an age of exploding technology. First, he said, there is the barrier of language. Howe stressed that people in the pews felt the preacher expected them to know more about scripture and theological terms than they actually did. We simply no longer live in a day and age where the basic tenets and texts of Christianity are known and appreciated by the whole culture. In my own experience I was the last generation to grow up with prayer and Bible study in my public school. It was there in kindergarten and first grade, sporadic in second and gone by third grade. The culture at large no longer takes any responsibility for religious knowledge. Theology may once have been referred to as the “queen of the sciences,” but no longer. People today are more likely to know Biblical quotes through their use in Shakespearean plays or speeches of statesmen like Abraham Lincoln, than their original contexts. For example, I once asked a group of octogenarians who originally said, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” All but one said, “Lincoln.” And the one who named Jesus as the origin of the saying could not name chapter and verse (Mark 3:25 and parallels). In this post-Christian era we can perhaps expect very little knowledge of “churchy” language, even though Jones points out that the people in the pews have far more access to such knowledge through the internet than ever before. The simple fact that the Church is no longer at the center of culture means that even with access to knowledge people do not always choose to avail themselves of it. And the cultural reality of the Church’s


15 An interview with Tony Jones time stamp 6:00.
dwindling authority may make them even less likely to do so.

Second, Howe says our perceptions of each other affect our ability to communicate. What the preacher assumes about the parish and what the parish assumes about the preacher will impact what is heard and what is not. The two have a history together. In addition, cultural depictions of clergy and Christian people help to shape how preacher and people perceive each other. Here is where the scandals by church leadership even erode the authority of a preacher not embroiled in scandal. In addition, the flattening of hierarchies brought about by new media may make the preacher suspect from the outset—before he or she even speaks. Parishioners may be wondering, “Why do you get to speak and I don’t?” Cultural perceptions of Christians as narrow-minded and judgmental may even effect the preacher’s perception of the people in the pews.  

16 Bass, pp. 80-81. She claims that the marriage of evangelical theology and conservative politics “may have been the worst marketing campaign for the word ‘Christian’ since the Salem witch trials.”
Our perceptions of each other and the Church can even affect the style of preaching we use. In my multi-generational discussion group on preaching at St. Patrick’s one parishioner said she associated styles of preaching other than reading from a text, such as using visual aids, PowerPoint presentations, and video clips with Pentecostal and Evangelical theology. It was hard for her to get past the method to hear the message. She simply could not see mainline theology being presented in styles more aligned with churches with which she did not agree.

Third, Howe cites the differences of age, sex, educational level, race, and cultural background to name a few. We could add to this the differences in aptitude and preference regarding aspects of multiple intelligence or multiple learning styles. We could add still further differences in aptitude and preference for usage of rapid changes in technology—a book reader may approach a sermon differently than a young person who uses text and Facebook as primary communication tools.

A fourth barrier to communication could be the anxieties or challenges being faced by the preacher or by those hearing the sermon. We see the world through the filter of the events that impact our lives. A preacher going through cancer treatment may have a different take on the Gospel in preaching. In addition, a parishioner suffering with cancer, or losing a job, or experiencing conflict with children, will hear a sermon differently than those whose lives are less stressful.

\(^{17}\text{Saint Patrick’s Group} \text{ Video disc 2, time stamp 23:44.}\)
Finally, Howe says that defensiveness can get in the way of communication. The preacher may be defensive about feedback and resistant to try new ways of preaching feeling as if he or she has learned enough about the task to be competent in the field. Whereas parishioners have come to their own conclusions through study and experience that may differ markedly from the preacher. This can engender its own defensiveness. The access to the vast array of information provided by the internet could exacerbate such defensiveness. A well-informed parishioner may even believe they know far more than the preacher about a political issue, let alone the illustrations from life the preacher utilizes as examples.

However, in a day and age where internet feedback is instantaneous and every media outlet allows for comments, questions and feedback, defensiveness is not an option. The use of on-going feedback loop has, for better or worse, simply become a part of the media landscape in which we find ourselves. This is true for both the preacher and the parishioner.
I would add a few more barriers to communication between preacher and people than Howe provided. First, I would add the political climate of the current age. It brings its own kind of defensiveness. As we enter into what *Los Angeles Times* journalist Ronald Brownstein calls a second civil war, one of words, attacks and partisan entrenchment, differences in political leanings can create a fissure between congregation and preacher. The old joke—“what separates the Democrats from Republicans in the Episcopal Church? The altar rail”—takes on a more ominous tone in an age where friendships end and people distance themselves from each other based on party affiliation.18

Second, there is the barrier of authority. In a day and age where all authority is questioned, in which hierarchies have been flattened, and when claims to ultimate truth are always suspect, the congregation may be resistant to the faith claims of the preacher. The preacher, in turn, may question his or her own ability to claim anything of ultimate truth in an era that rejects such claims.

Third, there is the barrier of history. A congregation has a history and sometimes that history surrounds preaching. For example, any rector serving Trinity Church, Boston, has to deal with the legacy of Philips Brooks. In another case, I personally interviewed for a position at a Church where a previous rector was remembered with fondness for his use of props in the sermons. He once hauled a ladder into the sanctuary,

set it up and climbed on it while preaching on the text of Jacob’s ladder. I asked what happened to that rector. He was forced out by the vestry, partly over what they considered his “eccentric” behavior in preaching. So his story becomes a likeable tale, but also shows the congregation did not have much tolerance for unconventional preaching. Such a history affects the way a preacher is perceived in a community and affects what styles and forms he or she can use with any degree of success.

Craddock declares that “a preacher should not try to compete with predecessors or devise ways to erase the memory of other ministers known and loved by parishioners. It is a defensive and overactive ego which assumes that the memories of the listeners are a negative factor reducing the effectiveness of one’s own endeavors.”19 Even so, an awareness of the past will help inform the preacher about where to go in the future, possible pitfalls to avoid, and possible strengths on which to build.

The preacher has a history as well. He or she may walk into a congregation certain that the methods, forms, style and content that “worked” in a previous setting will automatically work in the a newer one, only to be surprised by feedback to the contrary.20


20 Hipps, *Session 5*, time stamp 13:37.
What Howe eventually realized is that, despite the barriers to communication, there were three sermons taking place anytime a preacher dared to speak. First, the preacher presented the sermon as written, as prepared; with whatever intention and meaning he or she wanted to share.

Secondly, the congregation heard its own version of the sermon filtered through all of the barriers listed above.

The third sermon was what the community made of the experience: how the preacher was changed by the act of preparing and delivering the sermon, how various members were transformed by what they took in and heard, and finally how all of that moved beyond the doors of the church to the actual action in community by both the preacher and the listener.\(^{21}\)

In light of this congregational context, the cultural context, and the vast array of options available how does the preacher decide what to do and move both the preacher and the congregation into greater variety for both content and style in preaching?

First, the preacher must know and continually learn about the congregation. Craddock describes this process as taking place in three settings.

\(^{21}\)Howe, pp. 46-56.
1. The formal setting—the on-going interaction between the preacher and the people within the context of congregational life. This would include meetings, pastoral visits, worship services, educational programs and coffee hour to name a few.

2. The informal setting—anywhere in which the preacher is not taking a specific role as congregational leader., such as parties, chance encounters, or other shared activities in the wider community. At my ordination to the diaconate Bishop William Black preached about leaning up against parking meters talking to people randomly encountered on the street as something essential to ministry.

3. Empathic imagination—in a sense the preacher putting him or herself in another’s shoes and attempting to understand the way in which others view and perceive the world. Craddock even suggests sitting where parishioners normally sit on Sunday morning and imagining the world they inhabit and what they may perceive when listening to a sermon.22

I would add to this list a charge: to find out through these encounters (or through a formal survey; see appendix one) what forms of communication members of the congregation prefer and the means by which they normally access information. Do they read? Do they like movies? Do they subscribe to a newspaper or magazine (and which ones)? Do they have a Facebook page and how often do they use it? Do they have a

Twitter account? Do they know how to Skype and how do they use this technology, to contact family or through work? To gather such information would give the preacher a clearer picture of preferred styles of communication that exist in the parish.

Secondly, the preacher must educate the congregation. How many preachers have actually taken the time to sit in an adult education forum and describe the process by which they create a sermon and then open it up to questions and feedback? Some preachers have experimented with feedback groups that change over time. A group of six to eight people would meet with the preacher. She or he would first share with them how the sermon was crafted. Then after every sermon the preacher receives feedback from the group. Membership in the group could rotate over time to educate as many as possible and hear feedback from them. (For a process of calling together such a group see the appendix two).

This would be an ideal group to sit with and actually ask what forms and content the preacher could utilize. For example, the group could be gathered and the preacher could show videos of different kinds of sermons and the kinds of options to choose from (a brief Google search would present thousands of videos of sermons). The preacher then could simply ask, “Which of these styles of preaching would be off limits here and why, and which new forms would you like to see?”

The preacher could also simply try new forms without preparing the congregation, just come to the time of the sermon and offer something completely different. The preacher who does so takes a great risk. They will challenge the barriers of history (the preacher’s own history of preaching and the congregation’s), of relationship (as the
congregation may view him or her differently after this), the barriers of language (as something new is introduced) and the barriers of assumption (as old assumptions falls by the wayside simply with the introduction of something new).

Challenging barriers can be a tricky thing. A Church is not often known as a place for innovation and creativity. It tends to look to history and tradition for authority and many congregations are threatened by something new. Shane Hipps says the creative and innovative preacher needs to follow the 80-20 rule: twenty-eighty-percent of what a preacher does or says must be in line with what the congregation already believes and in a style and format the congregation expects in order to allow for the other 20% to be creative in format or in offering new and challenging information.

Despite the risks, the need for trying a variety of options has never been greater. With at least four generational media groups sitting in our pews it behooves the preacher to do what he or she can, within the limits of their own talents and skills, to make the Gospel available to as many people as possible so that the Church can be the “chosen medium for God’s on-going revelation to the world.”

Ultimately it does not matter what technology or form we use if we have nothing to say. As Hipps says, “Relevance does not come simply from imitating culture or mirroring the techniques of Hollywood and Madison Avenue. It does not depend upon the adoption of electronic hardware in worship. Relevance is derived from


23 Hipps, Session 5 time stamp 13:15; 15:15.
experimenting with authentic and indigenous practices that emerge from the gift mix of a particular congregation for a local community. “

In other words, if we know our gifts, and if we know the congregation, the forms and content of preaching can emerge in a context that makes sense. The preacher proclaims the Gospel in ways the congregation can understand, using methods that the congregation can appropriate. In this way the Gospel becomes more than merely another piece of information in an era flooded with exponentially growing amounts of information, but rather communication and meaning given within a relational context of understood symbols in ways that influence real life behaviors.

To make all this happen the preacher needs to cultivate an atmosphere of trust. This takes time and a track record that reveals the preacher holds the best interests of the congregation in mind. They know that if a preacher uses puppets, or props, or music or some other alternative media other than just speaking one day, then he or she may provide a more traditional sermon the next time. A trust emerges that the preacher is working to respond to the diverse needs of a congregation.


25 *Saint Patrick’s Group* Video disc 2, time stamp 42:36.
Part Two--Options for the Preacher

In my experience of visiting churches and sampling sermons on the web, I have found that the two most common forms of preaching are: one, the completely oral sermon either read from a text or delivered extemporaneously (most common in mainline churches), and the PowerPoint sermon where a preacher uses visual images and outlines projected on a screen (most common in evangelical mega-churches). However, given the rapidly expanding media culture, the options are far greater than these two choices. The options available to the preacher are legion indeed.

The first author to deal with the effect of changing cultural media on preaching was Fred Craddock. In a book from the early 1970s with a prophetic title (given our current circumstances), As One Without Authority, Craddock introduced the turn to the listener. He invited the preacher to turn the preaching task upside down. As mentioned earlier, preaching 50 years ago was dominated by topical sermons in which the preacher offered a general truth and then expounded in detail with examples and illustrations. Craddock suggested the whole project be turned upside down; the preacher could take a particular experience, event, or story and come to general truths and conclusions from that context. It was a shift from deductive preaching to inductive and intuitive. It was a shift from the authority of the preacher to the authority of general human experience, hence a turn to the listener.

Craddock, Authority, pp. 51-76.
In a day and age where individuals have power to communicate as individuals (from texting to YouTube) such a turn has been very effective. Craddock’s method has been adopted and modified by countless preachers for almost 40 years. But it is only a start.

O. Wesley Allen, in his book *Determining the Form* offers seven different forms simply for oral preaching (without the use of props, visuals, video clips, songs or any other media).

First, he describes the historically understood model for preaching given to us by the Dominicans. It is the propositional sermon—offering a thesis, with three points supported by illustrations and a conclusion which repeats the thesis. It is the old theme writing project from grade school: tell them what you’re going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you told them.²⁷

Next he describes the exegesis, interpretation, application sermon. Here the preacher takes a text, shares with the congregation an interpretation of that text in its cultural context, and then applies the same lessons from that ancient context to our day and age.²⁸ If a preacher can find a particularly surprising or unexpected interpretation this could be very appealing to our human tendency to appreciate and be drawn in by surprise.²⁹

²⁹ Hipps, *Session 5* time stamp 17:50.
Allen describes a third form as the “verse-by-verse” sermon. Here the preacher takes a passage; exegetes each verse, and applies each verse to a contemporary setting. Such a sermon is linear, easy to follow, and moves logically from point to point.

Next, Allen elaborates on the “Four Pages Sermon.” It does not necessarily mean the sermon is only four pages long, but rather the “pages are a metaphor for the four main sections of the sermon. This form was widely used by reformation preachers. Page one presents a problem defined in the text of scripture. Page two gives detail about how that same problem exists in our world. Page three shifts to a scripture which provides a solution to that problem, and page four applies that same solution to the contemporary world.” The form presents a bit of tension and unfolding drama and change. It could be very appealing to the baby boom generation raised on sitcoms.

The fifth sermon described by Allen continues this idea of using dramatic tension. He calls it the “Valley Sermon.” It is a form originally described by preaching theorist Eugene Lowry. It is intuitive and fits perfectly with Craddock’s turn to the experience of the listener. It begins by presenting a problem, often related to the scripture used for the sermon. On the one hand is the scripture passage, and on the other are our lives which do not necessarily match up with the dictates, hopes and dreams of our sacred texts. The preacher then descends into a deepening analysis of the discrepancies between our lives and the text. But when we reach the bottom the preacher provides an “aha” moment or

\[^{30}\text{Allen, pp. 39-44.}\]
\[^{31}\text{Allen cites Wilson, Paul Scott, } \textit{The Four Pages Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching} \text{ (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999)}\]
\[^{32}\text{ibid. pp 47-52.}\]
“hinge” in our text or tradition through which we find hope for reconciliation, resolution or transformation. Then the hope is applied to our current setting and life.\textsuperscript{33} The form offers a sense of tension and resolution not unlike the short story or sitcom model. Again, this can be an appealing oral model of preaching to a culture shaped by visual media.

The sixth example Allen calls the “New Hearing” Sermon. This sermon fits with the format in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus said, “You have heard it said . . . but I say to you” (Matthew 5:21-48). It utilizes the element of surprise. It draws interest because it challenges what may be well-held assumptions. People stay connected because they want to know what new information the preacher will give them since he or she just told them that what they thought may not be adequate.\textsuperscript{34} I recently used this form in my sermon for Epiphany. I challenged the notion that there were three wise men traveling alone across the desert to find the baby Jesus. The text does not say how many wise men there were despite our hymnody, tradition, and Christmas pageants. I ventured that they probably travelled with an entire caravan and entourage. I then contrasted the entourage of the wise man, who bore gifts, were filled with joy, and came to pay homage to the new power represented in Jesus, versus the entourage of King Herod filled with fear and obviously threatened by this new power. By getting the congregation to think of entourage, rather than just three guys on camels I asked them to think of which entourage

\textsuperscript{33} Allen cites Lowry, Eugene, \textit{The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form} (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{ibid}, pp. 65-70.
they would rather join. Then I contrasted the culture of fear in our political world with the Church that shows up on Sundays to pay homage to the power of God. The effectiveness of the sermon hinged on getting the congregation to see beyond their assumptions about the wise men.

In a final example Allen describes the “Negative to Positive” sermon. This form begins with a question, often theological, such as: “Is there a heaven and hell?” or “should the church bless same-gender relationships?” By picking an urgent topic the preacher already has the attention of the congregation. Then, the preacher explores answers antithetical to his or her conclusion. This builds tension. But finally, the preacher offers a positive conclusion. This section needs to be at least a third of the sermon to keep the negative information from outweighing the answer the preacher wants to provide.\(^3\)\(^5\) This form is very risky because it is likely that many people in the pews may disagree with the stance taken by the preacher.

Allen provides a rather thorough list of forms for oral preaching. But as our cultural media explosion reminds us we cannot stop there. Thomas H. Troeger and H. Edward Everding Jr., in their 2008 book *So That All May Know* expand on the understanding of preaching by placing it in the context of Multiple Intelligence theory (MI).

\(^3\)ibid, pp. 73-77.
Howard Gardner, the developer of MI theory, believes that everyone is intelligent. He defines intelligence as, “a bio-psychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture.” If this is intelligence, then there are many ways to process information, solve problems and create things. Gardner named eight:

1. Linguistic—with a sensitivity to spoken and written language
2. Logical-mathematical—an affinity for numbers and science
3. Musical—performance, composition, appreciation
4. Bodily-kinesthetic—movement and use of the body
5. Spatial—inhabiting and manipulating spaces both large and small
6. Interpersonal—relational, sensitive, intuitive
7. Intrapersonal—self-aware

People may be adept in more than one area, but they tend to have areas of strength and areas of weakness. By appealing to a variety of intelligences the preacher may help more people appreciate the sermon and hear the Gospel. Although Troeger and Everding admit that, “There is no magical formula for applying this theory of adult ways of knowing to the preparation and evaluation of sermons,” they do encourage an intuitive awareness in the preacher so, “that preaching for adult ways of knowing can be more intentional and effective.” In addition, the authors offer numerous suggestions and examples, including actual sermons which preach to one or more ways of knowing.

One method would be to concentrate on a particular area. We already have years of literary history in preaching trying to appeal to the mindset of the literary person. But as the authors point out there is so much more. For example, a sermon on the changing of water into wine at the wedding in Cana could appeal to the logical-mathematical intelligence by calculating exactly how many glasses of wine were produced by this miracle and what that tells us about God’s abundance. Simply using the words from a hymn or inviting everyone to sing, or in rare cases depending on the quality of his or her voice the preacher singing, would appeal to the musically minded. Using movement or asking the congregation to stand up and move (perhaps when preaching on the wilderness wanderings) would appeal to the kinesthetic intelligence.

ibid, p. 107.
Talking about relationships or feelings, or asking the listener to imagine him or herself as a character in a Biblical narrative of relationships, draws in the interpersonal thinker. Reflection and invitations to introspection invite the intrapersonal intelligence. Moving things around, including furniture and parts of the worship space may invite the spatially oriented. Bringing in a prop from nature like a seed when talking on the parable of the mustard seed would appeal to the naturalist.

Another possibility may be for the preacher to appeal to more than one intelligence in a single sermon. For example, the preacher may reach a great deal of clarity about the conclusion of the sermon—the desired message to be conveyed. As the examples, stories and means of getting to that conclusion are explored MI theory can be taken into account. In other words, there is one message but multiple ways to get to it.

I once told a teacher in the congregation I serve about this method of preaching, having a single message but presented in multiple ways to appeal to multiple intelligences, and she said that as a teacher she had been doing this for years and it was time we preachers “got with the program.”

One severe limitation in Troeger and Everding’s work is the lack of reference to visuals and props. Yes, they do talk about movement. But they largely keep preaching as strictly an oral medium. How much more would we appeal to those of spatial, kinesthetic and natural intelligence if we used actual space, movement and even props from nature?
Paul St. Germain of St. Mark’s Episcopal Church, Upper Arlington, Ohio has a long history of using props. He does so as a response to our visual culture and as an attempt to “integrate a physical environment with a virtual environment” to bring the preached word and the physical world together. His general plan is to arrange a group of props on a table or stand. He puts them in place at the front of the Church before the service so that people can come and examine them and perhaps wonder what the sermon will be about. Then, the props are left up so as people are coming up to the altar for communion they can examine the materials and reflect further on the sermon. Some may choose to view the materials after the service as well. Often this leads to on-going conversations about the sermon and its implications.

As St. Germain said, “It’s all trying to relate the Gospel to their lives right now; to take a display that may have objects in it they find recognizable and then be able to take that recognition into the Gospel message and find its relevance to their lives right now.”

Some props he has used include a Guatemalan ceremonial mask and the *Star Wars* droid R2D2 as symbolic of false prophets we may listen to rather than the prophets of our faith. He sometimes uses Caution tape or Danger tape when handling tough issues. Usually he uses more than one prop at a time arranged in a display. At the top of the display he always uses something like an icon, a loaf of bread, a chalice or other beautiful object to be the primary image he wants.

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38 *An Interview with Paul St. Germain*, Video disc 1, time stamp :56.
39 *ibid*, 3:52.
people to remember. In a sense he moves from mere props, which are communicative, to symbols, which are more evocative.

St. Germain says that props add a degree of “accessibility” to the sermon. “It’s a little easier to jump into something visual and then move into the spoken word.” He says the props also help people who may have drifted or gotten lost in the sermon to come back to the point by focusing again on the visual aid.

At St. Patrick’s we have done work with puppets. It all started with a sheep we named “Agnes Dei.” (and her sisters Gloria and Doris). Agnes comes across as naïve and idealistic. My assistant portrays the puppet, and the sermons with her are usually dialogues between me and Agnes about the meaning of some aspect of faith. The sermons are very basic but appeal to all ages. They may be intentionally written for children, but the messages are adult as well.

We have expanded the number of puppets and recently did a series of sermons on the story of Job which utilized a puppet that never spoke, but nonetheless gave a visual reminder of Job’s suffering and defiance.

40 Ibid, 8:50.
41 Ibid, 10:49.
42 Ibid, 10:55.
43 Saint Patrick’s Group Video disc 2, time stamp 20:40. See also Craddock, Fred, Overhearing the Sermon: Revised and Expanded (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002) pp. 15-30. He describes how the preacher can trust the listener to manufacture meaning from the message as presented even in nontraditional forms.
Another option is the use of a video screen. They are ubiquitous in the mega-church movement but almost non-existent in main-line churches. The advantage they bring is that instead of quoting a movie or TV show, or even YouTube clip, the preacher can show the actual clip. The key is to use it as a visual media, however. If the preacher simply uses PowerPoint to put an outline on a screen with perhaps a couple of images around it, how is that different from the literary culture of the print-era’s form of preaching such as three points and a poem? In a visually oriented culture, images and video clips can enhance a sermon. The rules about appealing to multiple intelligences still apply. It is obvious that using images and video clips will appeal to a few sets of intelligences more than others.

In my own experience I have rarely used video clips. However, one format where my congregation always uses video is in our U2charist. The service itself comes with video clips which are very appealing to a younger generation.\(^45\) One year I used a video clip to introduce my sermon. The sermon was about getting ourselves oriented away from our consumer culture and giving more attention to the intangibles that matter in life, like faith. I began the sermon with a short clip from George Carlin’s routine on “stuff.”\(^46\) His video revealed the absurdity of our obsession with “stuff” and consumerism far better than I ever could.

That is one of the rules for using video. Use video and visuals not simply because we can but because they enhance the message.

\(^45\) *Saint Patrick’s Group* Video disc 2, time stamp 13:45.
\(^46\)Carlin, George, *Stuff*, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvgN5gCuLac](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvgN5gCuLac)
This past year I made reference to an entire movie, *The Hunger Games*, not just a clip, as a parable for Pentecost (see appendix three for the sermon). I described the main character Katniss Everdeen as a model of the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. The book and movie enhance the parallels by referring to her with a bird title, the Mocking Jay, and by calling her “the girl on fire.” Images from the movie, and maybe even short clips could have enhanced the sermon by giving visual connection to the point being made.

Still another option, depending on the talent of the preacher, is drama. Radio and television have developed our cultural ability to tell stories; millions and millions of stories. Drama is everywhere, from the major movies and sitcoms to short music videos and even 30 second commercials that contain a short story in themselves. If the preacher has the capacity to act, or if members of the congregation can also, then drama may be an effective tool for getting a message across.

For over thirty years, “Tom Long and Friends of the Groom,” a Christian drama troupe from Cincinnati, Ohio, have been writing, acting in, directing, and teaching others in the art of dramatic presentation. They write much of their own material, teach, perform and preach in churches, and hold workshops to help others learn how to act. Some of their plays are too long for a sermon, but some are short enough to use in less than 20 minutes. Tom has developed a few single character and small group scripts that can be performed by a preacher and/or others.⁴⁷

The most radical option comes from Tony Jones. The church with which he is affiliated, Solomon’s Porch in Minneapolis, has completely abandoned the pulpit and opened preaching and interpretation to the whole community. The sermons at Solomon’s Porch are community affairs. Jones says that the practices of the Church are based on Jurgen Moltmann’s ideas of relational theology which brings together a community beyond hierarchy with a radical notion of God’s presence revealed through all things (panentheism).

The effect of panentheism is to “First, sacralize the world. By believing that God’s presence is in all things, congregation members are encouraged to recognize that presence as they go about their daily lives . . .(and) secondly, these practices desacralize the church. That is, they relativize the church’s standing among the many institutions in which their members are involved; the church is thus no more or no less important.”

The effect also relativizes hierarchy as a layperson and clergyperson are viewed as having the same standing and authority. This, Jones says is a response to the cultural reality in which we live and the way “new media are flattening hierarchies across our culture.” After all, as Jones said in an interview, “Nowhere in my life do I listen to a 25 minute lecture without dialogue. Why would I voluntarily do it on Sunday morning?”

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49 *ibid*, p. 178.
50 *An Interview with Tony Jones* time stamp 8:15.
In the context of Jones’ observations, “The Bible is better understood by a Christian community when the interpretation thereof is engaged by the entire community” rather than by one seminary-trained clergyperson.\textsuperscript{51} This is especially true when the means for gaining knowledge about exegetical interpretation are so readily available through the internet and people can be trained to use such resources.

As a result, Doug Pagitt, the founder of Solomon’s Porch, convenes a weekly Bible study group in which all members of the congregation are encouraged to take a turn. The group studies the texts for the week’s “sermon,” does some interpretation during the Sunday worship and then leads a discussion in which all present are invited to contribute as they try and relate the Biblical text to their actual lives.

Pagitt goes so far as to say, “monological sermons are not sermons at all”\textsuperscript{52} since they take away from the interpretive role of the community.

The closest I have seen a contemporary Episcopal preacher get to dialogical preaching comes from the work of a colleague, George Glazier, of St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, on the campus of Ohio State University. Glazier sometimes utilizes what he calls “the offering plate sermon.” It follows a four-step process:

\textsuperscript{51}Jones, \textit{Church is Flat}, p. 173.
\textsuperscript{52}ibid, p. 58.
1. Announce the Offering Plate Sermon a few weeks in advance and make an announcement at the beginning of the worship service.

2. Collect the questions immediately before the reading of the Gospel.

3. The usher bring the Offering Plate forward at the beginning of the sermon.

4. The preacher picks out a question at random and offers an answer that lasts five minutes or less. A total of three to four questions are answered.\textsuperscript{53}

Though not as egalitarian as what Jones describes in \textit{The Church is Flat}, Glazier’s format is dialogical. It relates the preacher’s understanding to the questions raised by the congregation.

Finally, there is the new media itself. Sermons can be posted on a web-page as text, as audio files and as video. They can be posted on Facebook in the same manner. A video file can be shown on YouTube. Then, access to the sermon opens to every computer user around the world. The sermon, then, becomes not only the event within the community but an event across the entire digital community choosing to access it. Is it still a sermon? Does the digital community have any less ownership of the sermon than the preacher and community who heard it? If the sermon generates comments on Facebook and YouTube, does this constitute a worshipping community appropriating the information for living their Christian lives?

\textsuperscript{53}George Glazier, \textit{Offering Plate Sermons: Oblation of the Preacher and Congregation} (Doctor of Ministry Project: The School of Theology, the University of the South, 2004) p. 5.
If Howe is correct, that the third sermon preached is the one the preacher and listener make of the sermon by their own actions, then a sermon accessed by the internet or social media may have just as much effect on behavior and feedback as a sermon in a congregation on Sunday morning. Still, we are too new to this world to fully evaluate the impact of internet access to preaching.

Whether the preacher is going to choose inductive preaching, use a variety of tried and true forms, appeal to multiple intelligences, use a screen, use props, act, open up community dialogues, or broadcast the sermon to the digital universe, he and she must have a criteria by which to decide. I will turn first to theoretical criteria and examples from my own preaching. Then, I will provide video and transcripts on how using various options relates to my own congregational context as a preacher.
Choosing among the Options

With such a dizzying array of options available to the preacher, how does he or she choose what to do? Well, in one way the choice is easy. Not all preachers will be effective in all the forms of media listed above. However, chances are that a preacher has more capabilities than he or she knows. Just as Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences supposes we have more and different kinds of intelligence than we are fully aware of, so too the preacher has more gifts and skills than or she may know. And the preacher can always train and learn.

Even if the preacher feels capable of using only a couple of these options I propose two rules for how to choose what to do. First, the media for preaching must be an extension of the preacher and the message he or she wants to get across. In other words, don’t use a screen just because you have one. The visual image used must be inseparable from the message proclaimed.

As Hipps points out form his research on McLuhan, media can be a trap. McLuhan tells the story of Narcissus. He was mesmerized by his own reflection in a mirrored pool and so was undone. He failed to perceive the media in which he found himself (the mirror) and so remained trapped. “When we fail to perceive media as extensions of ourselves, they take on godlike characteristics and we become their servants.” But Hipps goes on to cite the story of Perseus who also experienced a

54 Hipps, Electronic Media, p.36
mirror. It was the bright silver shield he used when he went to battle against the medusa. By using the mirror as an extension of himself, Perseus was able to view the medusa without her gaze turning him to stone and so defeat her.\(^{55}\)

As William Brosend says the homiletical question before every sermon is, what “the Holy Spirit wants the people of God to hear from these texts on this occasion?”\(^{56}\) Once the preacher is clear about the message then decisions about media can flow from that. For example, as mentioned above I used a video for a sermon at the Dublin Irish festival. The decision to use the George Carlin video clip about “stuff” came from the realization that the sermon would be about our cultural over-obsession with stuff at the loss of substance. Carlin made the point far better than I could in a comedy routine already somewhat well-known. Instead of quoting Carlin I could actually show the clip.

\(^{55}\) *ibid*, p. 34.

When I used tomato seeds and a tomato as props (see video: *Tomato Seed Sermon*) in a sermon on the parable of the mustard seed it worked as an extension of the message itself, the inevitability of God’s coming kingdom compared to the inevitability of plant life in a fertile land. It also appealed to multiple intelligences by appealing to the natural mind, the kinesthetic and spatial mind as they envisioned a changing moving, dynamic world.

In every case the choice of media must be intentional. The preacher is not to be enamored by a particular media form like Narcissus in the pool, but deliberate and thoughtful in the choice of what to use like Perseus doing battle with Medusa. One way will lead to stagnation in preaching as forms are used with little self-awareness. We can get stuck, either always using a screen, or always using inductive preaching, or always using props. “No form is so good that it does not eventually become wearisome to both listener and speaker.” The other way is dynamic and leads us to be aware of the media used and the purposes for using it. We use a video because it conveys the message we want. We use a prop because it gets the message across to more people than if we did not.

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58 Cradock, *Preaching*, p. 177.
The second rule is to allow the text itself to be a guide as to what form of media to use. Fred Craddock, in his book *Preaching*, details the idea of choosing the form of the sermon based on the form used by the text of scripture itself. Passages like John 18:12-27 which move back and forth from Jesus before Annas and Peter’s denial, as each story accentuates the other, lend themselves to sermons with at least two contrasting ideas in tension with each other. Passages like 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, which describe problems in the community around the Lord’s Supper, lend themselves to sermons on specific issues of justice and their connection to the Eucharist.59

I have witnessed this method taken to more extremes then Craddock proposes. In one case, a student of mine in the lay preaching class of our Diocese preached a sermon on the *Magnificat* by writing and delivering a poem (see appendix four). It completely followed the format of the Song of Mary by being a song itself.

I used a brief drama in a sermon on Mark 6:14-29, the beheading of John the Baptist (see video: *Sermon with Dance and Drama*).60 The intrigue makes the lesson read like a Shakespearean play. So I highlighted the drama of the scripture by using drama in the sermon. The message remained the same; we sometimes preserve our own honor at the expense of honoring God. If I had the talent and time I would have written the text for the drama in iambic pentameter.

59*ibid.* pp. 176-179.

In a sermon on a text from the psalms with vivid descriptions of the natural world, such as Psalm 114, a preacher may be aided by visual images or actual props. For a sermon on the Council of Jerusalem, Acts 15, maybe dialogue would be highly appropriate.

Whatever criteria the preacher uses for selecting the form and content of a sermon one thing is certain: the choice must be a conscious one. Media are meant to be an extension of ourselves as preachers and the message we hope to proclaim, not an end in themselves.

Finally, whatever media the preacher uses, it will be used in the context of a congregation, with its own norms and expectations. It is to this context that we now turn.
Part Three—My Current Congregational Context

Conversations about the nature, content and style of preaching began at my current parish, St. Patrick’s, almost as soon as I arrived 10 years ago. I formed a Bible study group which met every Wednesday, the purpose of which was to study the lessons for the upcoming Sunday. What it quickly became was a preaching influence and feedback group. The participants began to talk about the previous week’s sermon and ask questions such as, “why did you concentrate on that part of the lesson yet our Bible study was more interested in (something else)?” Then, the participants began to give suggestions for content. In addition, they reviewed the content from the previous week and offered evaluative statements.

Such conversations influenced the content of many sermons from that point forward. However, they had very little impact on the form of the sermon. I assume this was the case because the members of this group were self-selected and mostly over the age of 50. They liked a written out and well-delivered sermon.

So I expanded the conversation. In 2009 I started asking the youth group what they thought of the preaching at St. Patrick’s. I received some rather interesting responses:

“You’re great father Stephen.”

“You’re funny.

“I like it when you preach. I actually listen.”
It was great feedback, but I wanted to know more of what they wanted. So, I sat down with a dozen high school aged youth and asked, “How would you do preaching differently if you were in charge of it?”

The response was immediate, “Let’s do a play,” said a junior in High School. “I’ll write and direct it.” Heads nodded and the energy of the room immediately rose to the suggestion.

She in fact wrote a play that became the sermon for the middle of our three Christmas Eve services for two years in a row (see Appendix five).

Giving the youth the opportunity to create and act in the play led them to share even more about what they wanted in preaching.

“Text me,” said one student. So we collected phone numbers and had two or three youth text lines form the sermon as they heard them one Sunday. They texted both youth and adults (some of whom were not even in Church that day).

Another student said, “Use visuals.” Then in 2010 we used the George Carlin video on “Stuff” at our U2charist at the Dublin Irish festival.

Another student said, “Have some dialogue.” So we tried dialogue sermons at our 5:30 Sunday service for almost a year.

Others asked for props, hence the puppets, props and images used in sermons included in the YouTube citations of this project, and in section four.
Even the requests that we place our sermons on Facebook and our website created opportunities for feedback and relationships. See appendix six for a copy of the feedback loop created by my 2012 Pentecost sermon (appendix three). The sermon was shared by some who saw it on Facebook and created its own feedback loop on their pages as well. The conversation expanded far beyond the day and place of preaching.

The Bible study, the conversations with the youth, and the public knowledge in the parish that I am working on a Doctor of Ministry in preaching created a feedback loop in the parish that is on-going.

On December 7, 2012, I tapped into that feedback loop in an intentional way by forming a group of parishioners from St. Patrick’s for a feedback session on preaching. Included in this group were a teenager, a young man in his twenties, a young mother in her thirties, a father in his forties, a college professor, a retired school teacher and an octogenarian.61

The first thing that came through loud and clear was the difference in media appreciation and use for each age group. On the one hand the young man in his twenties said that we will only reach him with such things as engaged “SNL (Saturday Night Live) skits, and YouTube videos of three minutes, that’s how long you have (my) attention.”62 At the same time the college professor in her late sixties said she was afraid “that unless you’re new, unless you’re young, you’ll be left behind in a sermon because it’s gonna

61 Saint Patrick’s Group Video disc 2.

62 ibid, time stamp 18:39.
start to be razzle dazzle.”63 She even said that one of the times we used theatre as the sermon she felt as if “she hadn’t been to church.”64 Meanwhile, the retired school teacher talked about his grand-daughter being mesmerized and engaged by the images used in our U2charist service.65 The teenager talked about how questions used in dialogue sermons with the whole congregation made him think how he would answer and about how seeing the sermon through social media helped him to access it.66

For the most part, the dialogue with this multi-generation group confirmed what was pointed out at the beginning of this project. In a Church where people of all ages worship, the preacher may face the daunting challenge of speaking to three or four totally different kinds of audiences: the over 60 crowd, who might revel in a well-constructed, literary sermon that deftly uses irony and the turn of a phrase; the 40 to 60 crowd who grew up on sitcoms and would just love to hear a good story with a great moral; the under 40 crowd who want vivid images and sound bytes that are memorable; and the youngest crowd of all, raised with the internet, who may be sitting in the pews thinking, “Why are you still talking? When do I get to talk? Why is this important?”67

63 ibid, time stamp 8:27.

64 ibid, time stamp 21:55.

65 ibid, time stamp 13:45.

66 ibid, time stamps 13:49 and 38:45.

67 Hipps, Session 5 time stamp 5:00.
The second point that came through loud and clear was that preaching is a communal process. The participants in this conversation were highly motivated to be there and even described their own role in the preaching process.

“It’s a shared responsibility”\(^{68}\) said the college professor. She was followed by the young man in his twenties who said we had a responsibility to “meet in the middle,”\(^{69}\) and the father in his forties who said preaching with a variety of media reminds us “we are a community.”\(^{70}\)

The third point was a validation of Hipps’ 80/20 rule that until a preacher has validated the congregations’ expectations on a regular basis he or she cannot venture into new territory. Creating an atmosphere of trust is essential, and takes time. Throughout this feedback session these congregational members kept acknowledging that a variety of forms are helpful if we want to reach as many people as possible. But using a variety of forms necessitates a degree of trust. As the mother in her thirties said, “You have a congregation that trusts you. And you can’t get that in one sermon. And you can’t get that in one medium.”\(^{71}\) Then she went on to elaborate that because of such trust I could

\(^{68}\) *Saint Patrick’s Group* Video disc 2, time stamp 32:33.

\(^{69}\) *ibid*, time stamp 33:12.

\(^{70}\) *ibid*, time stamp 33:38.

\(^{71}\) *ibid*, time stamp 42:36. See also, *Interview with Tony Jones*, http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=knEUGYeI4 time stamp :52.
try different options with people knowing that if the day’s sermon did not speak to them then other forms and content would be forthcoming at a later date that might communicate in ways more to their liking.

Finally, the overall theme of the conversation was that preaching needs to be in dialogue with the congregation served. As the octogenarian said, “It’s also helpful to give a little feedback.” By gathering together this group I learned a great deal about what the congregation expected from a sermon, what they wanted, and the kinds of media they preferred (or did not). They also learned from one another about their different media preferences and the way they wanted to receive information. In this sense, Tony Jones is right, the Church is flat. Even if the preacher is the only one speaking during a sermon, he or she is in relationship with the congregation in a way that influences the content and style of the sermon for the sake of communicating the gospel to as many people as possible.

72 ibid, time stamp 49:22.
Part Four--The Sermons

In this section I will present three sets of two sermons each. In each set the sermons will be on the same passage of scripture. The first will be a text only sermon preached earlier in my ministry. The second sermon will be a sermon from 2012 using some form of new media. In one sermon I use props. In other I use a puppet. In the third I scrap the traditional text sermon and replace it with a short drama. These newer sermons are all posted as videos on YouTube, with the web address listed in the title. Transcripts are also provided for review.

For each set I will describe what I hoped to accomplish by using a media different from text only. The sermons have also been reviewed by the group that assembled December 7, 2012 to discuss the topic of preaching. Their comments and responses were emailed to me and I will include some of their feedback as well. See appendix seven for the email sent to the participants in the feedback group.

The question is: did using an alternative form of media other than text actually accomplish what was intended? What difference did it make?

Sermon One--The Mustard Seed/Tomato and the Kingdom

The two sermons that follow are quite similar in message. They are both about the inevitability of the coming of God’s kingdom, and comparing that to Jesus’ references to the natural order of things described in his agrarian parables.
The first sermon, in Allen’s schematic of sermons, would probably be called a “new hearing” sermon. It attempts to get behind Jesus’ parables of the farmer planting seed and the mustard seed and apply them to our lives in a new way. It’s not about us creating the kingdom, but looking for it as it emerges naturally.

The second sermon adds two elements that would not necessarily come with a text only sermon. First, I welcome two young people up front to hold the props being used. By engaging the young people and having them move through the space of the Church I hope I engaged their kinesthetic and bodily intelligence. I deliberately do not address the young people holding the props until a little further into the sermon. This is done to create a kind of tension or expectation not only in the children who came up front but in the whole congregation. Human beings like surprises and having the young people hold the props and wait sets up that expectation. Simply using props engages the whole congregation in a visual way. The idea of using a tomato and a tomato seed, especially in summer, appeals to those with nature-oriented intelligence.

Bringing young people into the sermon and the use of props provide very little change to this sermon. My intention in using some media changes is not to completely do away with oral communication but just enhance it. In my experience very minor changes that acknowledge not everyone learns or receives information orally makes profound impacts on those whose non-oral learning styles are taken seriously.

The message is the same in both sermons, but hopefully the simple introduction of a couple of props, some movement, and the young people waiting helped reach more people than simply using a text.
I love planting a garden every year. My wife tells me that given what I spend on the garden, and the time invested, my tomatoes cost probably twice as much as they would in the store. I don’t care. They taste better, not like those things they strip-mine in Florida and California.

And it really doesn’t take that much time. Aside from occasional weeding, putting the branches through the tomato cages as the plants grow, and pinching off the suckers, it’s really not that much work. It’s actually amazing how the earth and plants themselves simply take care of growing and producing fruit. The natural process is a joy to watch.

When I was a kid visiting my grandparents or aunts and uncles I used to love to go into the open fields and woods to find wild blackberries. Sure, I had to watch out for the poison ivy (why do they always seem to grow together?) but I could always find buckets full of the berries just growing wild. There was no need to till the ground, no weeding or fertilizer, just nice sweet fruit. It came up all by itself.

Jesus tells his followers that the kingdom of God is just like this. It’s like the farmer’s seed, planted in the ground that just comes up. It’s like mustard seed that gets blown by the wind and just grows up wherever it finds itself, and it becomes a gigantic . . . shrub. At least Mark gets this right. Matthew and Luke have Jesus say that it becomes a tree in which the birds can make their nests. They’re obsessed with bigger is better.

But Jesus isn’t talking about big. He’s talking about natural. The coming of the kingdom
of God is as natural as seed germinating in the ground, or mustard seeds blown by the wind.

I’m not sure we’ve always believed this, or if we do even now. At the turn of the 20th century a movement arose called the Kingdom of God movement. One of its greatest proponents was a professor at Rochester Divinity School, Walter Rauschenbusch; not exactly a household name. But a great deal of the things we take for granted in this country came about because of his movement.

Rauschenbusch was adamant that Jesus did not come to found churches but to bring the Kingdom of God. And what he understood that kingdom to be was a place where no one went hungry, where everyone had a chance, where we treated even the least of these with dignity and respect so that all people could benefit from the fruits of the earth and the goodness of life. It is not churches we need to build, said Rauschenbusch, but societies.

This theologian then went about leading efforts to end child labor, to develop a national minimum wage law, to support, create and fund from public dollars a public system of education for all children. He talked of a social benefit to help the elderly so they could retire from work and not become destitute. He called on churches to work for these changes and reforms as a way of helping to bring the Kingdom of God on earth.

Rauschenbusch and his followers were not politicians but it was their efforts and their voice that led to a lot of what became enshrined in FDR’s New Deal legislation that created Social Security and so much more.

Even with all this success the Kingdom of God did not come on earth. The Great Depression raged on and did not really end until we got through World War II. Schools
improved but remained segregated in the south. People of Color suffered discrimination and were paid far less than whites.

And then, in the 1950s and 60s, Martin Luther King, Jr. began to speak in ways reminiscent of the Kingdom of God movement. Though he didn’t use the exact same language he did speak of dreams of a better life for all, especially across racial lines. King wanted to change the laws of the society to make a part of the kingdom happen.

Then, our own president, Lyndon Johnson picked up on this optimism and called for a war on poverty and a Great Society.

Still the Kingdom of God did not come.

Theologians have come to realize that any human effort to create the Kingdom of God on earth will always fall short. We are, after all, imperfect. And if we want an example of how epically we can fail at trying to create the kingdom we need look no further than the Puritans. After all, they came to this country hoping to create the Kingdom of God. Their great society would soon degenerate into violent attacks on their Indian neighbors and later the Salem Witch trials: not exactly God’s kingdom.

Today, here we are in the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. We’re watching our jobs, our 401ks, and our home values slip away: hardly the Kingdom of God.

But in today’s Gospel we hear Jesus say how natural it is for the kingdom of God to come among us. It’s as natural as the seeds germinating in the ground, or the mustard seed blowing in the wind and planting itself everywhere.

I know an attorney who handles divorces in a small town law firm. One of his clients, a woman whose husband had left her, always brought her teenage daughter to all
the meetings. The divorce dragged on for a couple of years and the daughter seemed to be effected most by the conflict. She dressed and looked more and more edgy and her mother began to complain that this smart girl had let her school grades plummet.

The lawyer got an idea. He told the teenager daughter, just before her senior year, that if she got an A in any of her classes for a whole semester he would give her $100 for each one. And, he added, if her grades were good enough to get into the local community college he would pay the first semester’s full-time tuition. He had done the math. If she got an A in every one of her classes and went to college it really meant that he was handling the divorce case *pro bono*. The daughter made a snarky remark but he could tell she was thinking about it.

The first half of the year she got three A’s. The lawyer gladly handed over the $300. The second half of the year she got A’s in all but one of her classes. She was accepted into the community college and the attorney gladly wrote the check for her first semester’s tuition.

“Why did you do this?” I asked him after he told me the story.

“It seemed like the right thing to do,” is all he said; as if it was as natural as the seeds germinating in the ground and the mustard seed blown by the wind.

Maybe that’s how the Kingdom of God comes. Sure we make headway toward it when we do the right thing as nations and societies. But perhaps it is these little things, when we make a difference in someone’s life just because we think it is the right thing to do, that it’s natural, that also bring the kingdom. It’s just the right thing to do; it’s as natural as the seeds germinating in the ground and the mustard seed carried by the wind.
Proper 6 Year B The Rev. Stephen Smith

June 17, 2012

Mark 4:26-34

Available online at:  http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=TGSj6QvIzN8

Request two volunteers from the audience

Hand one a tomato. Hand the other a seed. Then have them wait.

Jesus is in the Galilee. The Galilee, to the north of Jerusalem, was the breadbasket of ancient Israel. And I learned something in my Doctor of Ministry classes this week that I did not know. There were no Roman troops in the Galilee. No, they were all down in Jerusalem protecting that major city. The Galilee was under the control of Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. And the Romans let him control the Galilee as long as there was no trouble. Keep the populace under control and he would keep his power.

Now that doesn’t mean there were no Roman citizens in the Galilee. There were Roman Legionnaires who had retired to Tiberius a city which is right on the Sea of Galilee. It was the Miami Beach of the 1st century. And up in the hills near Nazareth where Jesus grew up the Greeks had built a city called Sepphoris. It was a nice place. There was plenty of food. The lake was nearby.

So these huge towns of Tiberius and Sepphoris had become very wealthy. The retired Roman officials and Legionnaires came with lots of money which they gave to the locals to fish the Sea of Galilee and raise their food on the local farms. So the Galilee was quite prosperous.
And in walks Jesus. He comes into the Galilee and starts talking about the Kingdom of God; the government of God. I use that last phrase deliberately because we don’t have kings anymore. Jesus is talking about who’s in charge. And in our day and age the government is in charge.

So Jesus comes and says the government of God is at hand and all these Galileans are probably thinking, “Wait a minute. We’ve never had it so good. Are you telling us things are going to change?”

This may come as a surprise to you, but maybe not everyone in the Galilee was thrilled about Jesus talking of the coming Kingdom of God, or the coming government of God, because maybe they are not going to be as well off as they are now.

But one of the points Jesus was making was that the Kingdom of God, the government of God makes no peace with oppression, no matter what. So he was saying that even here in the Galilee, which benefited so greatly from the Roman occupation, even here God would bring God’s reign.

We now know that the government of God did not arrive in Jesus’ day. It has not arrived yet. And we have come to realize that the fullness of the Kingdom of God only exists in the next life. But we have learned through history that pieces of it break through form time to time. It comes in bits and pieces here and there.

And Jesus is telling us the kingdom will break through. It is as natural as planting seed and watching it come forth as a plant to bear fruit.

(Turning to one of the small volunteers) What do you have here? It’s a seed right? It’s really tiny isn’t it? Do you know what kind of seed it is? Let me give you a hint (turn to the other volunteer and take the tomato).
Plant this seed in the ground—this one tiny seed—and in a short couple of months it will produce dozens of these (hold up the tomato). And each one of these will produce dozens more seeds which potentially could be planted to produce even more plants and fruit.

If we aren’t amazed by the miracle of life we should be, even for something as simple as a tomato.

(Thank the volunteers and send them back)

“It’s inevitable,” Jesus says. It is as inevitable as a mustard seed going everywhere and producing this gigantic . . . shrub. Jesus is using hyperbole here. The point is mustard seed just goes everywhere. It’s kind of like thistles. You can put as much stuff on your lawn as you want you’re still gonna get them. They just go everywhere.

It’s like the government of God, the Kingdom of God. It is inevitable that it will break through here and there before the end of time. It’s like the grass growing through cement. Peter Seeger has a song called “God Bless the Grass” that grows through cement. God must have blessed my driveway and sidewalk because the grass keeps coming through. Things left to themselves, the grass will always win. It is inevitable.

And maybe the Roman Empire did not fall in Jesus’ lifetime but it did fall, because God’s kingdom makes no peace with oppression.

And years later when Martin Luther realized that the pope was not only oppressing and controlling the life of the people in this life, but also the next, then he stood up and said this doesn’t make any sense. How can this even be about the Kingdom
of God or the government of God? And so with his challenge to the Church the Kingdom of God broke through.

And when our founding fathers came to this country and started a new nation on this continent then Jefferson and Adams looked at the idea of the divine right of kings. They had studied other religions and did not find anything like the divine right of kings in any of them, and they dared to say this doesn’t make any sense.

Instead it seems self-evident (it only makes sense) that all people are created equal, and the government serves at the behest of the governed. It only makes sense.

And today, Aung San Suu Kyi stands up to oppression in Burma and says this doesn’t make sense for a government to control and abuse its people in this way. Even though she was under house arrest for 20 years she still won the Nobel peace prize. And so God’s government breaks through. This week she finally got to go to Norway and give that speech of acceptance of the prize.

We come to our senses form time to time, no matter how messed we human beings seem to be. The government of God, the Kingdom of God breaks through. But I don’t see it breaking through lately.

We’re about to enter another election cycle and we all know what will happen. We are talking about massive cuts in government spending, some of them perhaps good. But the candidates are getting ready to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on their campaigns. And we all know what they’ll do with it. They’ll develop television ads that talk about how their opponent is so messed up. It’s all going to be about the negative, and for what? To tell the 3 to 5% of the population that is still undecided who the bad guy is so they can vote for the good guy. And they won’t talk about the issues.
And then for whoever gets in power, the lobbyists will spend hundreds of millions of dollars, and will write legislation for our legislators so they won’t have to. And the legislators will be beholden to them because they know they need their money to get re-elected.

This doesn’t make sense. It doesn’t make any sense at all. Maybe it’s time for the Church to ask how does the Kingdom of God (the government of God) break through that mess. I’ll tell you how. I’ll give you two jobs this week. One, call your candidate for president and say, “Stop the attack ads. Don’t do it. Talk about the issues.” If enough us do that maybe it will change.

And secondly, the attack ads are so polarizing they are dividing us as people. We don’t talk to each other anymore. So the second thing to do is find someone who is voting for the candidate you are not voting for and talk to them like a real human being and listen to them and what they have to say. We might learn something. And the Kingdom of God just might break through.

Jesus tells us it is inevitable. It is as inevitable as a tomato plant growing up and giving lots of tomatoes, and each of those tomatoes giving lots of seeds. It is as inevitable as the mustard seed blowing everywhere or the thistles that do the same. It is as inevitable as the grass growing through cement.

In the grand scheme of things—vote for the grass.
Feedback

In general, the feedback on this sermon was not very positive. As the retired school teacher in the feedback group wrote, “I thought the tomato and seed got the point across, but in the overall sermon they only played a minor part. . . .” (D. Pittsenbarger email 3/21/13)

The father in his early forties wrote, “I understand the comparison to the mustard seed, or the tomato growing or the grass through the cement but, I’m not sure that having the girls up to visualize the seed and the tomato helped drive the point home.” (S. Norris email 3/21/13)

The octogenarian wrote, “The two volunteers were an interest-catcher to start with, but didn't really add much to the point of the sermon in the long run.” (C. Loveland email 3/22/13)

The retired professor wrote, “The props and dramatic presentations serve as distractions to me.” (R. Walker email 3/22/13)

Even so, the 16-year old high school student wrote that the prop sermon, “had (a) much stronger messages than if I had merely (heard) the text.” (M. Robinson email 3/23/13).

Some of this feedback may be age-related as to media preference, with an older member of the congregation finding the props a “distraction” and a younger member hearing a “stronger message.” Even so, the retired teacher suggested I did not go far enough in the use of broader media for this sermon, “I think that sermon had opportunities for many visual aids, such as photographs of people like Luther, MLK, etc. It would have shown how the "government of God" has been progressing through time
and has been around at times. This is when some big TV screens in the sanctuary would be nice.” (DP 3/21/13)

Even so, two of those giving feedback seemed certain the young people who were called forward would be impacted by the sermon more than anyone else simply by their participation in it.

Clearly this sermon may have not been improved by props and inviting the young people forward. The sermon made its point with or without the additions.
Sermon Two--Job the Puppet

The next two sermons are almost identical. One was preached in a previous congregation over 12 years ago. Since the content was not time specific to the Church or world events it could easily be used again. An additional story was added to the beginning of the second sermon.

The original sermon would have fit in Allen’s category of “Valley Sermon.” We are taken to the depths of realizing that being sure we are right, like Job, can lead us to depths of despair and loneliness. Then, an “aha moment” in the concluding story gives insight and hope for a new way of looking at things.

In both sermons the use of family stories offers a deliberate attempt to appeal to interpersonal learners as well as baby boomers that seem drawn to story sermons.

The second sermon, using the Job puppet was actually part of a series of three sermons by the clergy of St. Patrick’s. The puppet was created specifically for these sermons and was given characteristics to represent Job’s behavior and moods. For example, the only hard part of the Job puppet was his head. After all, Job could be pretty “hard-headed.” The rest of his body was deliberately light and little more than baggy cloth. This was to represent his debilitated and afflicted state. Plus it was easy to let him drop into a heap to represent his despondency. We did not tell the congregation about these attributes but hoped they picked them up intuitively. The Job puppet was also not given voice. We would let the text speak for him and allow his visual image to represent broader moods and interpretation for the text. It was hoped that using this physical prop would also engage the visual aspect of learning on the part of parishioners.
Two things stand out in the video of the sermon. First, notice the acolytes seen in the background both at the beginning and end of the sermon. She was not the subject of the sermon but it is hard not to see her in the early going and conclusion when the camera focuses in on the Job Puppet. This 11-year-old girl does not really engage the sermon at all in the first section when the puppet Job is displayed. She is reading the bulletin and perhaps even bored (not unusual for an 11-year-old in Church). However, at the end she is engaged with the puppet, and presumably with the text. Something has brought her back. And perhaps that is a value of props and visuals: they may become re-entry points for a person who has lost track of the sermon, or if the sermon has taken a direction or utilized styles that do not appeal to a listener’s media preference. Given the broad difference in media preferences found in the current culture it may be too much to assume that anyone listens to an entire sermon. Using variety in form may provide helpful places of re-engagement.

The second thing that stands out is when Job stretches himself out across the altar at the time when the text accuses him of making an altar to himself regarding his “being right.” This was deliberate. It connected the place where we proclaim the presence of God in the bread and wine (the altar) with Job’s usurping God’s presence in his own desire to be sure he is right. It is hoped that the visual use of Job helped spark the visual learning of some parishioners and so communicated the message in a broader way. And by using the altar deliberately with reference to communion and the presence of God, I hoped to connect the content of the sermon with later actions of the liturgy.
Proper 23 Year B October 15, 2000

The Rev. Stephen Smith

Job was right. He was absolutely right. He stood before God. He shook his fist at God and said, “I have done nothing. I have done nothing that would warrant this kind of tragedy happening in my life. Nothing! I am just and upright and I have lived with integrity.” And he was right. Job had done nothing, nothing to deserve the things that happened to him.

Job’s friends came to be with him, to console him. They sat with him for seven days and said absolutely nothing. They should have stopped there, because as soon as they opened their mouths, they made things worse.

The first friend said, “Job, this is not how it works. You must have done something. If you hadn’t all these calamities would not have come down on you.

Job said, “No, I have done nothing.” And Job was right.

His second friend came to him and said, “Job your children must have done something horrible and that’s why all this has happened to you.”

And Job said, “No my children did not do anything.” And once again, Job was right.

His third friend came to him and said, “Maybe you forgot. Maybe you did something so horrible that you forgot about it and all of these calamities have come upon you because of thing you did and forgot about.”

And Job said, “No! I know for a fact that I didn’t do something I have forgotten.” And Job was right.
And when God finally speaks to Job’s friends, he lets them know that Job is right. He says to them, “Who is this who darkens council without knowledge,” which is a fancy Hebrew way of saying; ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Job was right and had every reason to complain, because calamities were visited upon him for no other reason than that calamities are visited on us from time to time. He did nothing wrong.

And so in his anger, and anguish and frustration he turns Psalm 139 on its ear. If you don’t remember Psalm 139 it’s the Psalm about where God is. And God is everywhere. It says, “If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your right hand will lead me and hold me fast. If I go to heaven or make the grave my bed even there you stand by my side.”

But Job says, “Where are you? If I look behind me you are not there. If I look in front of me you are not there. If I look to my left or my right you are not there.” And so Job is completely alone.

Job was right. But there is a problem with being right. By right I don’t mean being accurate. Two plus two will always equal four. By “right” I do not mean the imperatives by which we live our faith, the ten commandments, as recited in the Gospel today; thou shall not kill, thou shall not steal or commit adultery; we won’t abuse each other; the baptismal promise that we respect the dignity of every human being. Yes, all these things are imperatives, but beyond them there is a lot of room for negotiation. And, in fact, it is negotiation and relationship with one another trying to figure out what is right that brings us together. If we are absolutely sure we are right, all the time, about
everything, we often sacrifice our relationships for the sake of being right. It can leave us alone and it can destroy things.

So let me tell you a story that Walter Wangerin used to tell. He used to serve a church in Marquette, Michigan which is way up north by Lake Superior. It gets down to 40 below in the middle of winter up there. When Walter retired he moved to warm climes—in Chicago!

Walter used to get mad at his vestry in Marquette because he wanted them to buy a humidifier for the sanctuary. And they never would. But when you are pouring a lot of heat into the sanctuary just to get it up to 60 degrees there is a lot of static electricity. People did not shake hands or hug during the peace. They would just nod to each other because even when you got within two feet of somebody that spark would just jump. And he said serving communion was nearly impossible. Every time he reached for a wafer on the paten, the static electricity from his fingers would make it move. So he had to pin it down first before he could pick it up.

One cold winter day Walter was distributing communion and there was Mitchell with his arms crossed, not receiving communion. And all Walter could think was, “What have I done to tick him off now? What did I say in the sermon so that he won’t even take communion from me?”

You see Mitchell was one of those people who always had to be right, and always had an opinion about everything. Walter said he used to hate going into his office and seeing that little light blink on the phone telling him he had a message. Invariably he would push the button and hear, “Walter it’s Mitchell . . .” And then he’d say something like, “You gotta do something about those acolytes, they keep wearing sneakers.”
‘Walter, it’s Mitchell. You gotta do something about the budget. What are doing over-spending so much?’

“Walter it’s Mitchell I need to talk to you about something you said in your sermon.”

And so he thought, “Oh great, here we go.” And there’s Mitchell with his arms over his chest.

Walter took Mondays off, and when he went into the office on Tuesday there was that light flashing. He didn’t even want to touch the button. But he did and he heard, “Walter it’s Mitchell. I need to make an appointment with you.” So he called Mitchell back and he came in the next day.

Walter was surprised to see him uneasy, because Mitchell always seemed so self-assured, so confident and so sure that he was right. Then he said, “Walter I gotta tell you. You know I’ve been divorced for years and I’m alienated from my daughter. Well, I called my daughter last week because I want to reconcile. I want to make things right. We had a good talk. She’s agreed to meet. But I’m afraid and I just don’t know what to do. So on Sunday I prayed and prayed and prayed that God would let me know, somehow, that it was all going to be OK. Then I came to the communion rail and I put my hands out and I put down my head and prayed some more, and when I looked up there was the host in my hand and you were still two people away.”

You know what happened. Walter went to stab one of those wafers and it flew. Was it static electricity or the Holy Spirit? Maybe both. But Mitchell was a different person after that. He was lot less concerned about being right. He was a lot more enjoyable to be around.
Our friend Job was right. And God was nowhere to be found. Unlike the Psalmist who finds God in the farthest sea and the depths of hell, Job cannot find God at all. But he really isn’t looking that hard. He can’t find God in front or behind, to the left or the right. That’s because Job has created an altar for himself as a place where he can stand and be right. And as he stands on this altar he has created to worship his own need to be right, there is no room for anything or anyone, but him. There is no room for God. There is only room for Job and he is alone.

There are times when we can be right or be with God. It’s our choice.

Transcript of a sermon with a puppet

Proper 23-Year B; the Rev. Stephen Smith

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

Available on line at: http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=h9XDP9LtBok

The comedian Jeff Allen says that on the day he got married his father gave him some advice.

“Son,” he said. “You can be happy or you can be right. You can’t be both.”

Well he goes on to tell the story of the first house bought by him and his wife. They spent a whole day moving in and were really tired and so they decided to take a nap. But before they did his wife said, “Let’s put a chicken in the oven so it’ll be done when we wake up.”

So, they went off to sleep. A little while later his wife is shaking him awake saying, “Jeff, the chicken’s done. You gotta go carve the chicken.”

He rolls over sleepily and says, “I don’t know how to carve a chicken.”
“Neither do I,” says his wife. ‘But the guy’s gotta carve the chicken.’

He sits up in bed, “Where did this law come from?”

So he gets up and goes out to the kitchen and the meal is all set up. And there’s the chicken in the pan. So he gets the knife and he gets the fork and he’s cutting. And his wife immediately says, ‘You’re doing it all wrong.”

Now wait a minute didn’t she just say that she didn’t know how to carve a chicken and in the span of just a few minutes she’s become an expert. So he sighs. He turns away from the chicken and toward his wife while holding the fork and knife. Suddenly her eyes get really big and he realizes how this looks. He puts the knife down. He pokes the chicken with the fork and thinks, “Maybe if I turn this thing over I’ll figure out what to do.” So he starts to turn it over just as his wife bends down to look at it and he bumps her forehead with the chicken.

He said it was the biggest fight they have ever had in their marriage.

“And to this day,” he says, “my wife tells all our friends and relatives that I assaulted her with a knife and threw a chicken at her from across the kitchen. And I do not object because I want to be happy rather than right.”

Job was right. He was absolutely right. He stood before God. He shook his fist at God and said, “I have done nothing. I have done nothing that would warrant this kind of tragedy happening in my life. Nothing! I am just and upright and I have lived with integrity.” And he was right. Job had done nothing, nothing to deserve the things that happened to him.
Job’s friend came to be with him, to console him. They sat with him for seven
days and said absolutely nothing. They should have stopped there, because as soon as
they opened their mouths, they made things worse.

The first friend said, “Job, this is not how it works. You must have done
something. If you hadn’t all these calamities would not have come down on you.

Job said, “No, I have done nothing.” And Job was right.

His second friend came to him and said, “Job your children must have done
something horrible and that’s why all this has happened to you.”

And Job said, “No my children did not do anything.” And once again, Job was
right.

His third friend came to him and said, “Maybe you forgot. Maybe you did
something so horrible that you forgot about it and all of these calamities have come upon
you because of thing you did and forgot about.”

And Job said, “No! I know for a fact that I didn’t something I have forgotten.”
And Job was right.

And when God finally speaks to Job’s friends, he lets them know that Job is right.
He says to them, “Who is this who darkens council without knowledge,” which is fancy
Hebrew way of saying; ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about you turkeys!”

Job was right and had every reason to complain, because calamities were visited
upon him for no other reason than that calamities are visited on us from time to time. He
did nothing wrong.

And so in his anger, and anguish and frustration he turns Psalm 139 on its ear. If
you don’t remember Psalm 139 it’s the Psalm about where God is. It says, “If I take the
wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your right hand will lead me and hold me fast. If I go to heaven or make the grave my bed even there you stand by my side.”

But Job says, “Where are you? If I look behind me you are not there. If I look in front of me you are not there. If I look to my left or my right you are not there.” And so Job is completely alone.

Job was right. But there is a problem with being right. By right I don’t mean being accurate. Two plus two will always equal four. By “right” I do not mean the imperatives by which we live our faith, the ten commandments, as recited in the Gospel today; thou shall not kill, thou shall not steal or commit adultery; we won’t abuse each other; the baptismal that we respect the dignity of every human being. Yes, all these things are imperatives, but beyond them there is a lot of room for negotiation. And, in fact, it is negotiation and relationship with one another trying to figure out what is right that brings us together. If we are absolutely sure we are right, all the time, about everything, we often sacrifice our relationships for the sake of being right. It can leave us alone and it can destroy things.

Our need to be right has destroyed our political process in this country. Our need to be right has turned some good religious people violent and into terrorists. Our need to be right has separated groups of faithful people when we could do so much more if we worked together.

Being right’s not all it’s cracked up to be.

So I’ll tell you a story that Walter Wangerin used to tell. He used to serve a church in Marquette, Michigan which is way up north by Lake Superior. It gets down to
40 below in the middle of winter up there. When Walter retired he moved to warm
climes—in Chicago!

Walter used to get mad at his vestry in Marquette because he wanted them to buy
a humidifier for the sanctuary. And they never would. But when you are pounding a lot
of heat into the sanctuary just to get it up to 60 degrees there is a lot, whole lot of static
electricity. People did not shake hands or hug during the peace. They would just nod to
each other because even when you got within two feet of somebody that spark would just
jump. And he said serving communion was just nearly impossible. Every time he
reached for a wafer on the paten, the static electricity from his fingers would make it
move. So you had to pin it down first before you could pick it up.

One cold winter day Walter was distributing communion and there was Mitchell
with his arms crossed, not receiving communion. And all Walt could think was, “What
have I done to tick him off now? What did I say in the sermon so that he won’t even take
communion form me?”

You see Mitchell was one of those people who always had to be right, and always
had an opinion about everything. Walter said he used to hate going into his office and
seeing that little light blink on the phone telling him he had a message. Invariably he
would push the button and hear, “Walter it’s Mitchell . . .” And then he’d say something
like, “You gotta something about those acolytes, they keep wearing sneakers.”

‘Walter, it’s Mitchell. You gotta do something about the budget. What are doing
over-spending so much?’

“Walter it’s Mitchell I need to talk to you about something you said in your
sermon.”
And so he thought, “Oh great, here we go.” And there’s Mitchell with his arms over his chest.

Walter took Mondays off, and when he went into the office on Tuesday there was that light flashing. He didn’t even want to touch the button. But he did and he heard, “Walter it’s Mitchell. I need to make an appointment with you.” So he called Mitchell back and he came in the next day.

Walter was surprised to see him uneasy, because Mitchell always seemed so self-assured, so sure that he was right. Then he said, “Walter I gotta tell you. You know I’ve been divorced for years. I’m alienated from my daughter. I called my daughter last week because I want to reconcile. I want to make things right. We had a good took. She’s agreed to meet. I’m afraid and I just don’t know what to do. So I prayed and prayed and prayed that God would let me know, somehow, that it was all going to be OK. So I came to the communion rail and I put my hands out and I put down my head and prayed, and when I looked up there was the host in my hand and you were two people away.”

You know what happened. Walter went to stab one of those wafers and it flew. Was it static electricity or the Holy Spirit? Maybe both. But Mitchell was a lot less concerned about being right after that. You can be right or you can be happy.

Our friend Job is right. And God is nowhere to be found. Unlike the Psalmist who finds good in the farthest sea and the depths of hell, Job cannot find God at all. But he really isn’t looking that hard. He can’t find God in front or behind, to the left or the right. That’s because Job has created an altar for himself as a place where he can be right. And as he stands on this altar and stretches himself out there is no room for the
bread or wine, there is no room for the presence of God. There is only room for Job and he is alone.

But don’t worry; this is not the end of Job’s story. We read about him for four weeks and this is only week two. Stay tuned. But I think Job is learning that he can be right or he can be happy.

**Feedback**

One member of the feedback group identified completely with what the puppet intended. The father in his forties wrote, “The puppet imagery allowed me to ‘be’ Job. It brought a ‘tangible’ reality of Job to me and allowed me to better feel his anguish. In fact, I think the ‘rawness’ of the puppet (no face, generic motion) helped me to mold him to my vision. I guess it worked as a sort of ‘vessel’ for me to ‘see’ the conflict.” (SN 3/21/13)

The retired teacher felt distracted by the puppet at first but then said, “As the sermon progressed, the puppet became a focus to visualize what your words were saying.” He added, “I believe the puppet’s movements, especially at the end when he fills the altar with himself, really showed visually what was going on with Job. I do not think I would have gotten that as clearly if you were only speaking.” (DP 3/12/13)

The octogenarian, however, did not connect with the puppet in any meaningful way. “I did not feel the Job puppet was effective. We couldn’t really see the motions unless we were on the altar. You got the point across equally well in both sermons - that we are in trouble if we always have to be right.” (CL 3/22/13)

Yet the 16-year-old felt moved by the emotion generated by the puppet, “Emotion adds an integral level to understanding the (sermon).” (MR 3/23/13)
The father in his forties also identified with the stories in the sermon, saying, “I think the preamble story of the couple and the chicken really helped me to relate to the concept of ‘being right or being happy’. It’s curious that this sermon and those words have stuck with me (and) my personal life.” (SN 3/21/13)

Clearly this sermon and the added use of a simple visual spoke to some members of the feedback group more than others. It shows how even a simple addition to a sermon that speaks to a particular media preference (visuals) or learning style (interpersonal and inner personal as exemplified by the relational and emotional comments) can reach some people in a very effective way. This just provides another example of how using variety may mean that we miss speaking to some people, but others hear the message in a much more profound and meaningful way.
Sermon Three--From text to drama

What follows is probably the biggest departure from a text only sermon to another form of media. The first sermon is text only; the second is a short drama with a brief afterword.

The earlier text-only sermon would probably fit Allen’s ‘Exegesis, Interpretation, Application’ form of preaching. At the outset of the first sermon I introduce some rather complicated exegesis. I point out the two places in scripture where the phrase, “Ask me for anything even to half of my kingdom” appears. I analyze the different circumstances and possible connected meanings of both. Then I do some historical review of the honor-shame culture of the ancient world and its impact on the story of Herod’s beheading of John the Baptist.

In my experience I get two very different responses to this level of exegesis included in a sermon. There are those who love history and the meanings of ideas, concepts, and cultures. They offer positive feedback whenever I include such detail in my sermons. On the other hand, there are those who hated history in High School, and certainly don’t want to hear it in a sermon. I can see their eyes glaze over as soon as I start to explain the exegesis.

The two sermons attempt to get across the same point: that in attempting to save face and look good we may actually be doing ourselves, others, and our relationship with God more harm than good. But the two sermons use very different means to get there.

The impetus for doing a drama came from the feel of the lesson itself, and the admonition from Fred Craddock to utilize a form for the sermon that fits with the form of
the lesson. To me, the beheading of John the Baptist reads like a Shakespearean tragedy. So I created a Shakespeare-like soliloquy to serve as an extension and amplification of the story itself. It was also hoped that the place of honor in the ancient world would still come across in dramatic form without having to wade through an extensive exegesis.

The Rev. Stephen Smith, July 12, 2009

Sermon on Mark 6:14-29

“Ask me for what you wish, and I will give it . . . even to half of my kingdom.”

This phrase appears twice in scripture. Both times it is uttered by a king. Both times the utterance is addressed to a woman of beauty. Both times the king makes such an offer in the midst of a party, meal and celebration. It may imply the king is drunk or reveling in merriment and not fully aware of himself. Both times the king is struck by the gravity of the request made by the woman of beauty. The stories are extremely similar, until you get to the final conclusion.

Let’s begin with today’s Gospel. Herod is pleased by the dance of his daughter Herodias. In gratitude he offers her up to half of his kingdom. The girl goes to her mother and asks her what to request. Now Herod’s wife had originally been married to Herod’s brother. And John the Baptist publicly challenged Herod and his family by condemning this marriage. In bitter response, Herod’s wife asks for the head of John the Baptist, and her daughter relays the request to her father. Though grieved and saddened by the request, Herod complies.

Now we turn to story number two. Everyone who heard the Gospel of Mark or its contents when these stories where preached throughout the early Church would have
known story number two. It comes from the book of Esther. Esther is a Jewish woman living in Persia who becomes one of King Ahasuerus’ wives. The king has an advisor, Haman, who despises the Jews and especially their refusal to pay homage to anyone but God. Haman wants the Jews to pay homage to the King, and as the king’s advisor, to him. So he drafts a law for the King’s signature which demands that all pay homage to the King (and his advisors) under pain of death for refusal.

Esther invites the King and Haman to a dinner party where the King makes the offer of up to half of his kingdom. Esther asks for the life of her people and the repeal of the law that threatens them. The King is full of wrath (presumably about having to rescind his very own law) but he complies.

Two similar stories; two very different endings. In today’s Gospel a young girl takes the head of a prophet. In the story of Esther, a brave woman saves her people. The message would have come through loud and clear to the early hearers of Mark’s Gospel. This isn’t Esther’s time. We are in trouble.

To fully understand and appreciate what’s going on in today’s Gospel, however, we need to review a little about the culture of Jesus’ day. It is what scholars call an honor/shame culture. In the days of the Roman Empire, and even earlier in the Persian one as well, honor and shame had specific roles. Honor was due the heads of state and heads of households. Shame was not the same as being “ashamed.” It rather was the role of those who supported the ones with honor: the slaves and lesser members of the household. They were to take a position of shame or service to add to the honor of the head of state or heads of households.
The only problem with the honor/shame culture was the presumption that the amount of honor in the system was always static and fixed. If you had honor it was because others did not.

Now you may understand the grief and anger of the Kings responding to the requests. Ahasuerus risked losing honor by repealing a law he had already enacted. Herod’s wife was actually protecting the family honor by calling for the head of John the Baptist. After all, he had publicly denounced the family. It put Herod in the horrible place of having to face the fact that until the request was made he had not done a very good job of upholding his own honor; hence the regard he pays for the courtiers and guests who witness his decision. He has to do something to “save face.”

Honor saved Esther’s people because she put love of God ahead of her own position. It doomed John the Baptist and ultimately Herod’s people because Herod put love of self ahead of everything.

We no longer live in an honor/shame culture, but some of its dangers still plaque our lives.

In some ways, our dealings with North Korea seem to be reminiscent of the honor/shame culture. Over and over again North Korea threatens to step up nuclear weapons development and testing. Over and over again they threaten South Korea and even the United States. And over and over again they don’t actually do anything beyond testing.

The diplomats try to find a way to condemn their pronouncements, and then offer food aid when they don’t follow through on any of their threats. It is as if we trying o find a way to condemn North Korea while still allowing them their bravado and saber
rattling for their own people. We give them an out to “save face,” or possibly uphold their honor.

But “saving face” can be far more personal than nation states. I have a colleague who became gravely ill not long before his retirement. He nearly died and spent a month in a nursing home recovering. His Bishop paid him a visit when he was about to be released from the nursing home, only two months before his scheduled retirement. In essence the Bishop asked him not to go back to the Church except for a celebratory goodbye. The Bishop had arranged for the Church to continue all his compensation and all his retirement benefits and to make arrangements for supply clergy.

“Take care of yourself and your health. Rest,” said the Bishop.

The suggestion was not met with enthusiasm as my colleague asked the Bishop to leave his room. And then, in a very public display of conflict over the next few days he threatened both the Bishop and his congregation with a lawsuit if he was not allowed to return to work.

“Saving face,” or preserving honor was more important to this man than his very own life. In the end, he only looked petty and vengeful. Sadly, he died less than a year after retirement. An attempt at keeping honor simply backfired in dishonor. He chose to honor self more than even his own health.

Even though we no longer live in an honor/shame culture I do think we have a tendency to want to look good, rather than be good. We surround ourselves with the trappings of status and position. We place incredible emphasis on appearance and looking good. And even our historic Church attendance patterns reveal a sense of trying to look good. Did you know that the biggest declines in church attendance took place
during the Great Depression? While the biggest increases in Church attendance took place during the boom years of the 1950s. Even before God we want to look good.

By verbally linking the story of Herod with Esther the Gospel gives us two ways of looking at honor. If we honor self at the expense of God and others we may look good for now, but not for long. If we honor God even at the risk of self or position we can bring life. The choice is ours.

Transcript of a sermon on the same texts using drama, July 15, 2012

Available online at: http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=it9dKJmdO9c

(Young Woman dances down the aisle before a reclining king)

King: That was a wonderful dance. Ask me for whatever you desire. I swear I will give it to you, even to half of my kingdom.

Young Woman (walking over to mother): What shall I ask for?

Mother: Ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

Young Woman (returning to king): I want the head of John the Baptist brought to me on a platter. (All stop for soliloquy by King)

King: It was a boast, a drunken and foolish boast. If she had asked for half of my kingdom I could have weaseled out of that easy enough. I could have said, “Of course. It will be yours when I’m gone.”

But she did not ask for half of my kingdom. She asked for the head of John.

I like John. I know that he is a man of God, and that he says what he means and means what he says. I am often perplexed by him. But I know he speaks the truth. I have
tried to protect John, but he has not done a very good job of protecting himself. He got into some meddlesome business by talking about me marrying my brother’s wife and bringing her and her daughter into my house.

What does John think, that those of us who are kings and have power are expected to live by the same ethic as the rabble who come out to be baptized by him? Hah, as if that were to happen.

And now in a drunken boast I have been challenged in the presence of courtiers and officers to bring the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

If I refuse . . .

If I show weakness . . .

Before the courtiers . . .

How many of them are waiting for me to show weakness so they can take my place?

And the officers. . .

How many of them would love to go and say something to Pilate about how I’ve misbehaved, or to Caesar? Then it would be my head on a platter.

Who will look out for my honor if I don’t? God?

He certainly hasn’t protected John thus far, has he? And John being a man of God?

No, it would appear, it would appear, that I have to look after my own honor. And let God look after his.

Guards, you heard the girl!
Afterword: When we save face, when we keep our honor at the expenses of others or of God, we dishonor ourselves, we dishonor others and we dishonor God.

God already knows our dishonor. And when we can humbly not save face, not save honor, but be honest about our imperfection then God also knows what we are capable of. And when we are honest with ourselves and with God then we honor ourselves, we honor those around us and we honor God.

Feedback

The dramatic sermon received the most positive feedback of the three sets presented to the feedback group. Everyone had something positive to say except the retired professor. Using a drama as a sermon makes her feel as if she has “not even been to church.” But she also admits that she much prefers the clear exegesis and written oral sermon as her primary means of receiving communication in Church.

The retired teacher was surprised. He really liked the original sermon with all of its exegesis, “Especially the explanation of honor and dishonor and so I thought it was probably not going to be enhanced by drama, but I was wrong.” (DP 3/21/13)

He went on to say, “The drama at first actually made me uncomfortable. It is further out of (my) comfort zone for sermons, but as it progressed it became very effective. Herod became real. As did his dilemma.” (DP 3/21/13)

The father in his forties offered an elaborate description of how he identified with the sermon, “I really liked the sermon with drama. Very much like Job, it invites you, if not sucks you into the conflict and challenges of the character. Through the drama, we get so much more of the angst and conflict that Herod is feeling. We go through the
thought process with him, we see him go through the pros and cons. We almost see that he knows what is the right thing to do, yet he talks himself into the wrong decision to ‘save face’. This is so powerful and, much like a TR (Theological reflection), we can all buy into it.” (SN 3/21/13)

Everyone commented in one form or another about taking time to do a short afterword to sum up. As one of the feedback group members said, it helped “coming out of the drama to underscore the teaching.” (DP 3/13/21)

This use of drama underscores how effective the use of an alternative media may be at communicating complicated exegesis in a more accessible way for some people.

Wrap-up on the Sermons

The second sermon in each set above used some form of media other than oral delivery alone in an attempt to communicate as effectively as possible to as many people as possible. From the feedback it is obvious they met with varied degrees of success. But there was success in communication. The Tomato and Tomato Seed, though not viewed especially positively, did add a new dimension to the sermon. The Job puppet really spoke to a couple of people, in both visual and emotional ways. These first two examples show the use of props and puppets as peripheral enhancements to the sermon. They are not absolutely necessary, but the feedback shows they may have aided in communication. The short play, which utilized a complete departure from typical preaching, captivated almost everyone in the feedback group.
Part Five--Conclusion

The rapidly changing media of our culture have created both a crisis and an opportunity for today’s preacher. The crisis comes from knowing that the vast array of media preferences represented in the pews of our churches means the preacher can probably never reach everyone in a single sermon. This may have never been possible. But the variety of media available today is simply daunting and a real challenge to all attempts at communication. After all, how do we get a single message across to a congregation when one group prefers visuals, another text and oral communication, still another texting or email, and still another drama, to name just a few possibilities? The opportunity comes from realizing the preacher does not have to use one format or style. Preachers today may employ variety in more ways than ever before. And if the preacher cultivates the opportunity for various uses of media in his or her congregation then listeners benefiting from the new forms may be incredibly grateful for the sincere effort made to reach them with the Gospel.

From the preaching I have done in my congregation and the feedback I have received it seems obvious that there are different media preferences in just the one congregation of St, Patrick’s, Dublin, Ohio. Media preferences are a highly subjective matter. How we receive communication and whether or not the message is heard, let alone appreciated, is hard to pinpoint with objective, pinpoint documentation. It is a moving target. But we may observe changing trends as communication media change. There seems to be a clear trend both in the culture and in the congregation I serve to the
need for more variety in methods and styles of preaching in order to reach as many
people as possible.

Ultimately it does not matter what technology or form we use if we have nothing
to say. As Hipps says, “Relevance does not come simply from imitating culture or
mirroring the techniques of Hollywood and Madison Avenue. It does not depend upon
the adoption of electronic hardware in worship. Relevance is derived from
experimenting with authentic and indigenous practices that emerge from the gift mix of a
particular congregation for a local community.”

What I have learned from my congregational context is that the changes in media
in our culture have helped create a world of instant feedback. From talk shows, to news
programs, to even some pulpits across the country everyday people can access the
internet and send their messages and feedback almost immediately. Talking heads on the
television give their opinions and views while a side bar shows selected real time
responses from watchers. Radio talk shows not only have those who call in, but
questions and comments emailed or sent by text and then read over the airwaves. Radio
and TV shows sometimes refer people to internet pages so that even more dialogue can
take place at a website at the same time as the show is broadcast. Some preachers have
experimented with real time texts going to the screens they use with questions and
comments from the congregation during the sermon.

73 Hipps, Electronic Media, p.154.
After reviewing so many possibilities for the form of preaching, after trying many of these forms, and after sitting down with my own congregation in differing groups and on various occasions to gauge their responses to the styles and content we have used I have come to one major conclusion. Given the changing media context, preaching must become more and more about dialogue with the congregation, even when the preacher is normally the only one speaking in a sermon. Because of the new media, the Church is flat, and so is the world around us. The preacher either allows him or herself to enter into a feedback loop with the congregation or else they speak in a vacuum with themselves as the only audience.

Yes, it helps if the preacher has a variety of media competencies and a degree of media savvy. But, in the end, the preacher serves the Gospel. It is the goal of the preacher to make the Gospel, the message the Holy Spirit wants to the community to hear, available to the community. And in a day and age when media saturation has made information and dialogue instantly available, the quality of the feedback relationship between preacher and congregation is of primary importance.

If, as Hipps says, the medium being the message means that the Church is the on-going Body of Christ and so the on-going revelation of God to the world, then a preacher in touch with his community becomes an asset. Even if it is just the preacher speaking, the quality of his or her relationship with the community makes possible the voice of that whole community proclaiming the Gospel through the sermon. And so the sermon becomes a means of the on-going revelation of God.
If the preacher nurtures this relationship and knows the congregation well, the moment he or she sits down to craft the sermon the age-specific media preferences of the people, the multiple intelligences represented by those in the pews, the stories of those the pastor serves, and the ways in which people access information will all influence the preacher’s preparation. And the Gospel will be heard.

**Video Conclusion at:** [http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=sHhsgcZm5r4](http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=sHhsgcZm5r4)
Appendix One

Creating a One-time Multi-Generational Feedback Group

As mentioned in the project there at least four major media groups represented in a single congregation; those over 60 oriented toward print media, the baby boomers oriented toward sitcoms and the prime-time TV generation, the MTV generation oriented toward sound bytes and emotionally laden content, and the media-savvy teens oriented toward fast-paced, interactive, visual interaction. If at all possible, each of these groups should be represented. Try to find people who you already know, through feedback, to be personally invested in your preaching. It may be good to include someone who is not particularly fond of your preaching as you will gain a great deal of information from them as to why. It would also be helpful to include someone who may be critical of your preaching. It will provide a great deal of information.

Ask each one personally to participate in the feedback session. Tell them it will be about preaching and how it works (or doesn’t) in your congregation. Also, let them know the group will be multi-generational and will explore the different media preferences of each age group and how that may effect preaching.

Once the group is gathered thank them for coming and start with the positive. Ask them to describe a sermon “that worked” for them and ask them to explain why it was effective. Encourage all ages to speak.

Then ask, “What doesn’t work, and why?” Try not to be defensive. This is about information gathering. In addition, what does not work for one age group may work very
well for another. If those differences come up in the discussion explore them more fully. Ask why one person may prefer a particular sermon more than someone else. Get the group to address one another about their differences in preference.

Next, ask about their media preferences. Where do they get their “news?” Do they prefer Facebook or Twitter for social communication, and why? How do they access information in general? What does this say about what they would like to see in preaching?

Next ask, what the group would like to see done differently? Again, this is information gathering so try not to be defensive. Given the variety of media outlets, forms, and content available no one preacher can expect to be all things to all people.

Then ask about topics for preaching. What topics are off limits? What topics have made people uncomfortable? Has this been positive in leading to increased reflection or negative as in shutting down relationship, conversation and community?

After this, ask them to envision the future. What do they believe preaching will look like ten or twenty years from now.

Finally, ask them to define their own role in the task of preaching. How does the community play a part in what makes for a good sermon? How do they prepare themselves to hear? How do they respond or give feedback? What do they do with the message they receive?

Finally, thank them for coming.
Appendix Two

Creating an On-going Preaching Feedback Team

Given the rapidly changing media landscape a multi-generational group may provide the best feedback. The group will provide consistency over time. They will meet prior to and after each sermon. If you follow the outline below they will become increasingly invested in your preaching.

The first task is to assemble the group by personally asking members to participate. Gather them for an initial meeting at which the parameters of the group are laid out, as follows:

* The group will meet after each sermon for a specified length of time (say 6 to 8 sermons).

* The group will covenant to read the lessons assigned by the lectionary on which the sermon will be based. Each person will commit to reflecting on the meaning of the lessons for themselves, asking specifically what message the lessons convey to them.

* At the feedback session discussion will proceed by asking the following questions: What was the message of the sermon in a single sentence? What illustrations, metaphors, or images do you still remember? Given your reading and reflection on the texts what surprised you regarding the direction the preacher took in the sermon? What could that preacher have done differently that would have made the sermon more effective for you? Is there a style or specific media used that enhanced the sermon, or could have enhanced it had it been used?
At the end of the session pass out the lessons for the next sermon and repeat the process.
Appendix Three A Pentecost Sermon using *The Hunger Games* as Parable

By a show of hands, how any of you have seen *The Hunger Games* movie or read the books?

I am currently riveted by the books. They tell an incredible story about North America sometime in the future. The only place that has wealth, opulence, good health care and technology in this future world is called The Capitol. It is surrounded by 12 districts that provide all the natural resources for the Capitol’s wealth and comfort. The people who live in the districts, however, work long hours and live on near starvation wages to make it all possible.

You would think this would be a good cause for revolt. Well, in the history of these novels, there was a revolt—75 years before the setting described. The revolt was crushed by the Capitol, and as a reminder of the Capitol’s power and control over the districts it developed the Hunger Games. For these games each district must select, by lottery, one male and one female between the ages of 12 and 18 and send them into an arena to fight to the death.

Before they go however, all of these young people are paraded before the entire nation in their youth and beauty. They have stylist and promoters who bring out the best of their youth and beauty for all to see. And everyone sees them. Even out in the districts where televisions are scarce and the electricity doesn’t always work; well the Giant screen TVs in the town squares seem to work and the electricity never goes off as long as the Hunger Games are in progress.
The main character in the movie and in these books is named Katniss. And when she is presented to the whole nation on live TV her stylist has given her a very special outfit. In fact, in the books she winds up being presented to the whole nation three different times. And each time she is wearing some kind of outfit which comes on fire, produces flames, but does not burn her. She begins to be known as “the girl who is on fire!”

She also turns out to be, as the story unfolds, a person of incredible compassion, and care. She is someone who will defend those she loves no matter what. In fact, the only reason she is in the Hunger Games is because her 12-year-old sister’s name was drawn at the lottery and she stepped forward and volunteered to take her place.

As the whole nation watches as the games unfold it is Katniss’ care, compassion and defense of those she loves that become the cause celeb for a revolution. Her care begins to challenge the powers that be and so transform a whole nation obsessed with power and control.

What surprised me about these books and the movie is that there is no religion—none. This is supposedly a future North America and there are no churches, no liturgies, other than those around the slaughter of the Hunger Games, and no pastors or priests. But about 2/3rds of the way through the first book I suddenly realized, the whole story is a religious one.

After all, Katniss catches fire but is not burned or consumed by the flames. Hmmmm, haven’t we heard that before about Moses and the burning bush? Her caring,
compassion and love become the cause for turning a world upside that is overly concerned about power and control. Hmmmm, doesn’t that sound like the story of the book of Acts? And even her symbol—in the movie and books Katniss wears a pin that becomes a symbol for the changing world she promotes with her very being. The pin shows a bird that is a cross between a blue jay and mockingbird, called a mocking jay. It’s a bird! Doesn’t that sound familiar, kind of like the dove we associate with the Holy Spirit?

Dare I say that this Pentecost the Holy Spirit is revealing itself in what appears to be a very secular set of novels, and a very secular movie. The Holy Spirit is coming to our secularized world that is often overly concerned with power and control and telling us that’s not what it’s all about.

Rather it’s about coming alive with the fire of God that burns in us but does not consume us. Instead, it empowers us to go into the world and transform it. From a perspective of love, caring and compassion, we remake the world around us. That’s the message of the movie, and it’s also the message of our God.

But isn’t that just like the Holy Spirit, to do its own work in whatever medium it finds itself? As Jesus said on Palm Sunday, if the people stopped crying, “Hosanna,” the very rocks themselves would sing out. And so in a world where the Church is no longer at the center of culture, where we struggle with relevance and connection over and over again, the Spirit uses the popular culture and media itself to get its own message across.
Is it any wonder that in Gaelic, the metaphor for the Holy Spirit is not the dove, but rather the wild goose. Gives all new meaning to the idea of a wild goose chase.

The Church often thinks it contains, distributes and manifests the Holy Spirit. Yes, we do, but the Spirit is not bound by our structures. Like the wind, it blows where it chooses. And then that wind whispers in our ear and asks us to join its movement of catching fire with the Spirit of God, and being about the business of care, compassion and love in a world hell bent on control and power. It’s time for us to be a people on fire.
Appendix Four—A Sermon utilizing poetry on the Magnificat

By Licensed Lay Preacher  Spencer Pugh

‘Twas the week before Christmas and all through the land
The people were shopping, the stores they were crammed
With panicky parents, hauling boxes and bags
Full of trinkets and toys and wrappings and tags.

I purchased my gifts; I had found the right stuff
And my bags they were filled with more than enough.
So I headed for home with my presents to wrap --
With luck I’d have time for a long winter’s nap.

I wrapped what I had and hid them away.
The kids wouldn’t find them until Christmas Day.
Now finally, I had some time - just for me.
In exhaustion, I plopped down before the TV.

My eyelids were heavy -- I dozed in my chair.
In that drowsy state, I heard things that weren’t there.

A heard small sound – a sound like a voice –

A girl’s voice, I thought, and she said “Rejoice!”

I opened my eyes, not sure what I’d see.

The room it had changed – gone was the TV.

Instead stood a person – a girl robed in blue.

(I know this sounds crazy, but I tell you it’s true.)

Her eyes, they were closed – did she know I was there?

I watched her, not daring to move in my chair.

She smiled and she sang, in a soft quiet voice:

“My soul magnifies my Savior. Rejoice.”

She sang of her Savior and of her great bliss.

How bless-ed she was to be chosen for this.

God chose her as mother, a peasant and poor.

Her voice, it was lovely (an alto, I’m sure).
She sang of the Mighty One, the most holy Name.

Who did these great things, the one and the same.

The merciful God who wipes away tears

Of those who respect him from year upon years.

It was then that I noticed this girl robed in blue

Was starting to “show” – she soon would be due.

The facts here before me led me to be wary --

The conclusion was clear: this girl must be Mary.

Her song then it changed and it took on some fire,

Much broader in scope, with words to inspire.

Her voice became louder. She sang with much passion

Of justice -- and a God who rules with compassion.

His arm is so strong and his reach is so far

That he scatters the proud wherever they are.

He casts down the mighty who rule without heart.

He raises the lowly – the Lord takes their part.
He tends to the hungry -- this Savior prepares
A banquet of good things to show that he cares.
But those who are rich and have much to eat
Are sent from the banquet – they don’t get a seat.

She sang of a God who remembers his word:
His promises made, his promises heard
By Abraham, Isaac, and all who hold dear
The covenant made in a long-ago year.

This song, it was tough, it was strong, even scary -
Not what I expected -- from meek and mild Mary.
This song spoke of power and kings taken down
Of rich going hungry and the proud scattered ‘round.

She sang of God’s justice for those in great need.
(This peasant girl was a fierce rebel indeed.)
Her passion it stirred me -- I moved in my chair.
The noise that it made let her know I was there.
She opened her eyes and she looked straight at me
And she spoke to me -- of what was -- and will be.
“This child that I bear, our God sends from above
To fulfill God’s promise of justice and love.”

And then, as I watched, this girl she became
A grown woman, much older, but Mary the same.
Much older, much wiser, with trials and with loss --
A woman who saw her Son die on a cross.

In spite of her pain, she spoke without fear:
“Jesus is risen, his kingdom is here.
God’s justice is now; it’s for us to claim.
The Mighty One calls us to act in his Name.”

“The moment is now, life’s not a rehearsal.
The events before us show God’s great reversal:
A virgin is mother, a baby is king,
The Cross is the sign of a glorious thing.”
“It’s up to you now – you must do your part.

The decision is yours, you have only to start.

The Father, the Son, and the Spirit -- all three --

Will help you accomplish what God wants to see.”

With those forceful words, Mary vanished from sight.

I shook off my stupor and noticed the night

Had passed into dawn. What a vision I’d seen!

I marveled at this and thought “what it did mean?”

--------

In the cold light of day I reflect on that vision

Of Mary, the mother, the rebel, whose passion

For justice, compassion, and God’s holy way

Was fulfilled by this baby, born Christmas Day.

I know that it’s up to us – here and now

To live into that vision and make it, somehow,
Come true for the poor and those in great need…

To fight the good fight, in word and in deed.

Mary’s message was clear, “Rejoice for God Holy,

But also remember to raise up the lowly.”

And so I proclaim what I learned on that night:

“Joyous Advent for all – and keep up the good fight.”

_Amen_
Appendix Five—A Christmas Play written by youth

Characters (in order of appearance):

Narrator (N)
Director (D)
Mary (M)
Joe (J)
Gabriel (G)

Townspeople, including Townsperson #1 (TOWN1), Townsperson #2 (TOWN2) and Townsperson #3 (TOWN3)

Innkeeper #1 (IK1)
Innkeeper #2 (IK2)
Innkeeper #3 (IK3)
Shepherd #1 (SH1)
Shepherd #2 (SH2)
Shepherd #3 (SH3)
4 or 5 Sheep
Angels
Herod (H)
Wise man #1 (WM1)
Wise man #2 (WM2)
Wise man #3 (WM3)
CHRISTMAS PAGEANT ‘09

By Sarah Bell

(Scene opens with the traditional set, N pacing back and forth, anxious. He’s mumbling something to himself, concentrating, but very worried)

N- Okay, okay...now, how should I say this? The introduction should be **inspiring**, but let the audience know that it’s time to **settle down** and **watch the show**! Okay, something like (**clears throat, turns to audience and says**) Welcome to the Annual St. Patrick’s Christmas Pageant! (**he holds pose and waits. ((if applause, wait. If not, keep going))**) No, no, no, that doesn’t sound right! How is that inspiring to them? (**gestures to audience, realizes they’re there and screams. In shock**) YOU’RE HERE!! (**small, high-pitched scream**) You’re not supposed to be here yet! (**freaked out, in scared whisper**) I was never here! You didn’t see anything!! (**heads for SR exit when D enters through SR, looking through papers**) 

D- (**noticing N**) Hey Narrator

N- Bye Director!

D- Whoa, whoa, whoa, where the heck do you think you’re going?

N- Don’t know, don’t care, as long as it’s the heck outta here!

D- (**Grabbing N by arm, swinging him around to his left**) Oh no you don’t! You’re not going anywhere. We **need** you! You’re the only one who knows the whole Christmas story by heart. That’s why I made you the **narrator**.

N- I am not the only one!

D- (**crosses arms, skeptical**) Name one other person in the congregation who knows it.

N- (**opens mouth as if to speak, then stops. After a moment he has revelation**) Meryl Robinson. She read it to me every year when I was in Sunday school.
D- Mrs. Robins? (N nods happily) You mean the 87-year-old who can barely walk?

N- (nervous, looking for a way out, then softly--) She has excellent speaking skills...(nervous smile)

D- No.

N- (begging) Come on Director, I’m not cut out for this kind of thing! I only do the pageants because it counts as community service hours for the Nation Honors Society!

D- Come on, that can’t be the only reason.

N- That, and my mother makes me.

D- Well your mother’s gonna be very happy, because you’re doing it.

(M walks in SR)

N- (noticing M) Mary! You tell him, tell the Director I’m horrible on stage and I can’t be in the show!

M- (joins D and N) You’re right, you’re terrible. But we don’t have an understudy for you so you’re gonna have to suck it up. (smiles, pats N on the shoulder as he stares in shock. addresses D--) Hey Director I need to talk to you about something.

D- Aren’t you supposed to be in hair and make-up? Or at least running your lines with Joseph?

M- Yea, you see that’s just the problem.

D- What? is the make-up crew drawing beards on the girls again?

M- No, no, the problem is Joseph.

D- What’s wrong with him?

(J just then 1 walks in from SR)

J- Heyyyyy Mary! What, what’s happenin?
(M rolls eyes as J crosses to her and puts his arm around her shoulder)

M- Hello, Joseph.

J- Please, call me Joe. Hey Director! Big D! (laughs. D and M are un-amused while N chuckles softly)

D- Joe, shouldn’t you be running lines?

J- Pssh! I know my lines!

M- Ha! Barely! (shrugs off her, turns to D) That’s the problem. He knows the words but he has no idea what he’s saying!

J- I know what I’m saying!

M- (incredulous) Say one of your lines.

J- (pauses, searches. Then--) Mary! The Angel of the Lord has given me great news!

M- And what does that mean?

J- (opens mouth, about to speak, says nothing)

M- (turns to D) See?

D- Joe, do you have any idea what’s even going on in the play?

J- (thinks for a moment) No, not really.

(D and M groan, N freaks out)

N- Great! Now we don’t have a Joseph!

M- Not necessarily. (to D) Director, do you think we could run the show real quick? Just to help him understand.

N- Are you crazy? We can’t have a rehearsal now! The audience is already here! (gestures to audience)
M.- (to audience) Well, you won’t mind, will you? (wait for/encourage reply)

D.- Alright, as long as the audience is okay with it.

J.- Hey look! There’s a guy behind the spotlight machine!

D.- And at this point, anything to help Joe.

J.- (as this is said J starts to walk SR, notices the spotlight still on him, stops. Walks SL to try to get away) Stop following me! (finally exits SR through door. Opens door, sticks out tongue, exits again)

D.- (shakes head. Calling--) Okay people, we’re running through it! From the top, people, let’s go!

(M exits SL. N approaches D)

N.- (timid) Uh, Mr. Director, sir, does this include me too?

(D shoves N to C, spotlight comes on N alone, D exits SR)

N.- (alone, afraid. Small nervous laugh. Clears throat, stands up straight. Deep breathe. Begins--) During the time Herod ruled Judea, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin.

(as this is said N moves to DSR, G comes out SL and crosses C. M., when mentioned, enters SL and kneels SLC. Also when mentioned, J enters SR and lays down SRC, sleeping)

She was engaged to marry a man named Joseph from the family of David. Her name was Mary.
G- (approaches M) Greetings! The Lord has blessed you and is with you. (M pulls back, frightened) Don’t be afraid, Mary; God has shown you his grace. Listen! You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.

M- How will this happen since I am a virgin?

G- The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will cover you. For this reason the baby will be holy and will be called the Son of God. Nothing is impossible with God!

(small pause)

J- (sitting up) Okay, now what just happened?

(ALL except J groan)

G- (furious) You’re kidding right? How is this difficult to understand? (to M) Is there a reason we made him the surrogate father to the Son of God? Because I have no idea what it is!

M- Try being engaged to him!

N- (nervously) Okay, okay, cool your jets, Gabriel, your wings are gonna fall off.

G- (huffs, storms off SL)

(M and N kneel next to J, one on each side)

N- Okay Joe, pretty much what happened is the Angel of the Lord came to Mary and told her that she’s going to be pregnant with God’s son.

M- But since Mary is a virgin she asks how this can be possible.

J- (beat) What’s a virgin?

M&N- (in shock, jaws drop, then they fall backwards with a groan)

J- What?
M- (sitting up quickly, with rushed anger--) Okay, okay!

(\textit{M whispers in J’s ear. Slowly realization dawns on his face})

J- Ohhh...(beat) Ewww....

N- So anyway! This is possible because nothing is impossible with God. And then Mary willingly accepts the task and blessing God has given her.

M- But did she really do it so willingly?

N- Well of course she did. She was a very loyal servant to God.

M- I’m not questioning her loyalty, I’m just saying that she had to be feeling more than just acceptance. (spotlight. \textit{Everyone else freezes as she steps DS. Pause}) why me? I know this is a great honor and a blessing to be chosen to deliver God’s son into the world but...I can’t help but be scared out of my mind! I mean, I’m not married, I’ve never had an experience with raising a child, and I’m what, 14?! And what about Joseph? How am I supposed to tell him that I’m pregnant, let alone that I’m pregnant with God’s child? I love him, but I’m not so confident that he’ll believe me. And even if he does, what if word gets out? What will other people think? How will they react to Joseph and his pregnant fiancé-- not wife, just fiancé! And how am I supposed to raise the Son of God? Why did you choose me?! (pause, calms down) I will accept this task...I will deliver God’s greatest gift to all of human kind....But please, God, just give me the strength to do it and give me hope that-- somehow-- everything will be okay. (she closes her eyes, silently praying, and steps back USL)

(ALL unfreeze. \textit{N moves back to DSR, J to SRC and lays down, M to SLC})

N- And so the news had been delivered to Mary about her expectant child-- God’s child. The Angel Gabriel then visited Joseph in a dream to tell him of God’s plan for him and his future wife.

(pause. Nothing happens)
N- (clears throat. A little louder--) The Angel Gabriel then visited Joseph in a dream to tell him of God's plan for him and his future wife!

G- (from off SL) I’m not going on!

N-Aw come on, Gabriel! We’re not finished yet!

G- No! I’m not working with that-- that ignoramus!

J- (sitting up) Hey! No one calls me a name I don’t know the meaning of and gets away with it!

(\textit{J} starts to stand up when D enters hurriedly through SR and stands C)

N- Oh thank goodness you’re here, Director--

D- (points to N) You: shush. (\textit{N} \\textit{resigns back to DSR, shrinking away. D points to J} You: sleep. (\textit{J} immediately falls to ground and snores. D calls--) Gabriel: speak.

G- (sighs. \textit{In monotonous voice}--) Joseph, the Lord has blessed you and your future wife, Mary. She will become pregnant and give birth to the Son of God. This has been done by the power of the Holy Spirit. You will name the baby Jesus, which means Savior, and he will be a great blessing to God’s people.

J- (sleepily, eyes still closed) ...Okay...(snores)

D- (calling to G--) Thank you. (walks to SR exit, stops, looks at J who snores again. D shakes head) Continue. (exits)

(\textit{J} sits up and walks C. M meets him)

J- Mary! The Angel of the Lord has given me great news!

M- I have received wonderful news as well! I am to become pregnant with God’s child!

J- That is the same as I have heard! And we shall name this child Jesus.

N- (leaning in) Did you get all of that, Joe?

J- I think so....So pretty much Gabriel told me the same thing he/she told Mary?
M- Yup. Not bad, Joe!

N- Now that you’re on a roll, let’s keep going, shall we?

J&M- Right. (BOTH exit SL)

N- In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

(as this is said multiple TOWNSPEOPLE walk across US from L to R and R to L, creating a buzzing crowd)

All went to their towns to be registered.

(TOWN1 bumps into TOWN2)

TOWN1- Hey, watch it!

TOWN2- You bumped into me! You watch it!

N- Uh, guys, those aren’t your lines. They sound too...modern. You have to be talking as if you were actually in Jesus’ time--

TOWN1- (turning on N) You stay out of this!

TOWN3- (coming between TOWN1 and TOWN2) Peace of the Lord be with you! Please brothers! Let us not fight! This is a troublesome time for all of us, this mass registration. Let us calm ourselves and go in peace as friends.

N- That’s more like it.

TOWN1&2- (to N) You shut up! (to TOWN3) You mind your own business! (BOTH look at each other, realize they have something in common, shake hands and walk off arm in arm SR)

N- (turns to audience, shrugs. Continues--) Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the
house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. (as this is said J and M come out SL and slowly walk across stage. The TOWNSPEOPLE slowly disperse. By this time M is visibly pregnant)

M- (to J) So are you following all this?

J- I think so…. So we’re here for…tax season?

M- Close. We’re here to be registered under the House of David, which is where your family comes from.

J- (stops) My dad’s name is Henry and we’re from Kentucky.

M- (rolls eyes, under breath--) Well that explains a lot. ( to J) Not you, Joseph’s family is from Bethlehem.

J- Ohhh, okay.

M- (sighs) Okay, Narrator, continue.

N- While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

(M starts going into labor, looks to J for help. J just stands there. After a while M gives up and smacks J on arm)

J- Ow! What was that for?

M- I’m having a baby, now help me!

J- Oh! Right! (he helps M, who goes back into labor and is in pain, over to Inn#1 and knocks)

IK1- (opens door) Yes?

J- Please good sir, my fiancé is in labor and we desperately need a place to stay for the night. Do you have any room for us in your inn?

IK1- I’m sorry brother, but I have no room for you, my inn is full as it is. But there are many other inns in town. Perhaps you will have luck elsewhere.

J- Thank you, friend. (IK1 exits. J and M move to Inn#2) So he doesn’t have any room for us?
M- (breaking character) You’re really getting better and better at this, Joe. (continues to go into labor)

(1 mouths “Yes!” and continues. Knocks on Inn#2. Inn#2 flies open, IK2 instantly puts a sign reading NO VACANCY on door without looking or speaking to 1 and giving 1 no chance to speak. IK2 then slams door shut. 1, stunned, turns to M)

1- Same thing?
M- (nods)
1- Okay. (they continue on to Inn#3 and knock)
IK3- (opens door) How may I help you, young ones?
1- If you have any vacancy for us in your inn, a place to stay for the night would help us greatly.
IK3- I am sorry friend, but I have no room for you in my inn. However I do have a stable that you could stay in. It’s not much, but it’s roomy and will provide you with shelter.
1- Thank you brother, but I’m not so sure my fiancé will--
M- (grabbing his arm in pain) TAKE IT!!!!
1- It sounds great.

(1 and M move US towards the stable. IK3 goes back into Inn#3)

N- And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn.

M- (before they sit down behind the manger, with 1 helping her--) What I wouldn’t do for an epidural!

N- (looks at them, then to audience, shakes head, and goes on--) In that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.
(as this is said 3 SHEPHERDS enter SL with a few SHEEP and huddle C, shivering, their flock around them)

SH1- (sighs) Another night in the field. Another uneventful night, watching over our flock.

SH2- Don’t complain brother, we make a good living and our livestock are healthy and happy.

SH3- Also it is a lovely night. The stars are smiling down on us, twinkling in the deep black sky.

SH1- True, true. I suppose I’m just wishing for excitement.

SH2- That’s right, brother. Be content with your life, for it is a happy one.

SH3- (looking up, then in shock--) I think you’re about to get your wish.

(the SHEPHERDS stand as they look up. G enters SR)

N- Then an angle of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

SHEPHERDS- (huddled in fear) We’re terrified!

G- Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord.

N- Gabriel, you’re back!

G- I said I wouldn’t work with Joe, but I would never let my shepherds down. (does cool handshake-high-five thing with SH3. clears throat--) This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

N- And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host (other angels come out and stand around G) praising God and saying:
ALL ANGELS- Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!

(after a moment the ANGELS leave and the star appears in the sky. The SHEPHERDS stand alone in wonder and awe)

SH3- Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us!

(the other two nod and ALL exit SL)

N- Wise men from the east came to Jerusalem. (3 WISEMEN and KING HEROD-- a fat, greasy character-- enter from SR and walk across the stage while speaking)

WM1- Herod--

H- Ah ah ah! King Herod!

WM1- Yes. King Herod, we have heard of one born King of the Jews--

H- (rounding on WM1) WHAT?! I am king around here!! (advancing on the WISEMEN)

WM3- Yes, sir! Of course, sir! We have merely heard of this child who is the Son of God!

H- (stops, thinking. To audience--) Perhaps this child could be of use to me. Or perhaps I could...take care of him...and make sure he will never have power over me....(evil grin)

WM2- (tapping H on shoulder) We can hear that, you know.

H- (annoyed) I know you can, Larry! I know! You’ve told me every rehearsal!

N- Guys, guys, please! Not in front of the audience!

H- No, I’m sick of this! (to WM2) It’s called an “aside”, okay? It’s when a character says something that only the audience is supposed to hear. So even though Larry can hear me, Wise Man Number 2 can’t!

WM2- Okay, okay.
H: (huffs, continues--) Go and find this King of the Jews, and then tell me where he is so that I may go and...worship him....(another evil grin)

WM2: Okay, now it’s just completely obvious that you don’t really want to worship him!

H: AHHHH!!! (storms off SL, very angry)

WM2: (following H, the rest of the WISEMEN behind him--) I’m just saying that if you want to make an evil plan work you’re going to have to be a lot more convincing than that!

N: (shakes head) The shepherds from the field came upon Mary, Joseph and the baby in the stable. When they saw the baby they bowed down and worshiped him. (as this is said the 3 SHEPHERDS enter SR and go US to bow to M and J and sit around the manger) The Wise Men made their way to Bethlehem after seeing the star in the east (spotlight on star) and following it to the City of David. (WM enter SL with their gifts) They came upon the place where the child was and were overjoyed. They presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. (WM go US, present gifts and sit around manger)

J: (to M) So all these people are here to worship the baby because he’s the Son of God?

M: Exactly.

N: The Wise Men bowed down and worshiped the child, the Son of God. And Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.

J: Hey, what about me?

N: Well...I’m sure you were very happy too.

J: But it doesn’t even mention me. Don’t I get to have any input? (ALL freeze except J, spotlight on J as he picks up the baby and walks DS, looking at the baby the whole time. After a moment--) Look at him. He’s so...little. Little baby hands and feet. Little baby nose. Little baby mouth. And little baby eyes. These eyes will see so much. (pause. To audience--) You know, this might not be my son, but...I’m going to raise him like he is. I’m going to teach him how to fish and how to build things. How to read and how to treat people with respect. (looks at baby) I’m going to open those little baby eyes. I’ll show you the world, son. We’ll see the world together. (J steps back and returns US. He places the baby in the manger and takes his place next to M. ALL unfreeze. To M--) You know, I think I finally understand the story of Christmas, Mary.

M: You do?

J: Yea. It’s about the journey and the trials that people went through all to help bring God’s greatest gift into the world and deliver it to his people. It’s the beginning of a greater age; an era that knows only of God’s love.
M- *(smiling)* That pretty much sums it up, Joe.

N- *(comes C)* And so God’s son has been delivered into the world. Through his lifetime he would bring peace and love to God’s people—but all that couldn’t have happened if it weren’t for that Christmas night, long ago, in the city of Bethlehem.
Appendix six—Feedback Loop on Facebook for Pentecost 2012 sermon

May 29, 2012 at 5:38pm · Like

Linda Meadows Perch Wow! Now i need to read the books to spot this for myself! Thanks!
May 29, 2012 at 7:34pm · Like

Julie Kisner Ridgway Thank you for that Stephen!
May 29, 2012 at 8:06pm · Like

Kari Bowie Hertel Megan and I have read the Hunger Games series and I too noticed the absence yet presence of "God." While He is never directly mentioned, certainly the spiritual themes of love, hope, faith, gratitude, compassion, family, and commitment are strong throughout the series. I believe that democracy and freedom are also spiritual themes - and here they play out in the society lessons that mankind tends to forget & painfully re-learn.
May 29, 2012 at 9:42pm via mobile · Unlike · 1

Mary Frey Deininger Am reading the books right now. Great sermon!
May 29, 2012 at 10:02pm via mobile · Like
Joel Flint  Thanks for sharing.
May 29, 2012 at 10:26pm · Like

Stephen Smith  I'm on the third book
May 30, 2012 at 9:20am · Like

Dana Barbieri McMahon  Wonderful Steve.
May 30, 2012 at 9:35am · Like

Mike Shanahan  Great analogy. You hit the nail on the head as usual.
May 30, 2012 at 2:43pm · Like
Appendix Seven—Email request to feedback group

Dear Friends in Christ:

I so appreciate the help you all gave me back in December for that group interview about preaching. I want to prevail on you one more time for some help with my project.

I am attaching three sets of sermons. Each set has two sermons on the same Biblical texts from different time periods. The first sermon is only in written form. The second sermon is a transcript of a sermon available as a video on the web. The web link is given at the beginning so you can copy and paste the link into your browser and watch it. The audio is not always great so the transcript will help.

What my advisor wants is for me to get feedback from this group about what difference does it make (if any) to do a sermon with more than just words and text. Two of these sermons use props and one is a complete redo of the sermon as a dramatic presentation. What difference does this make to communicating the message, if any?

In the interest of full disclosure let me say that to view and read all three sets of sermons and make comments could take up to an hour and half. And sadly, I do not have much time. I would need any feedback from you by the end of the day Friday.

Sermon one uses a puppet and is on Job. The old written sermon and the new sermon are almost identical as far as text so you really don’t need to read the old sermon. I gave it 12 years ago in Hudson. The addition of the puppet as a visual is the only real difference. Sermon two uses props and takes a slightly different angle from the written sermon on message. How do the props help or not? Sermon three throws out the original text-based sermon and uses a drama instead.

Any comments, positive, negative, or ambivalent would be welcome.

Faithfully:

Stephen+

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