

## Homiletical Hack: Stop Starting with the Text

Rod Casey

I'm strongly proposing that preachers stop starting with the text. At first glance, the reader might find this proposition radical, if not outright repulsive. "It's certainly not biblical preaching," some might argue. But hang on, hear me out... keep starting the sermon's development with the text, but stop starting the sermon's delivery with the text.

"Open your Bible to Leviticus 23:22," the preacher begins. "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field..." they continue, believing this approach best honors the Word of God they so desperately want their hearers to embrace. Most agree biblical literacy is low. If so, isn't the antidote getting to the text right away? Isn't an answer to the disregard listeners have for Scripture to regard the text by giving it chronological primacy? The answer is no for the following reasons...

The sermon hearer doesn't care. The weekend church attendee lacks the motivation to engage the ancient near eastern culture's agricultural expectations. Having navigated a work week's challenging schedule, coaching a daughter's soccer team, and rousing a fourteen year-old son out of bed after a late night of video gaming, YHWH's levitical instruction for Israel to "leave the edges of your field for the poor and alien," fails to solicit much more than passive respect.

I tell my homiletical students the reason I know the weekend sermon hearer is apathetic regarding the text's relevance is because it's true for me. I don't care. When vacationing, I attend churches that are "working their way through a book of the Bible verse by verse." I listen to sermon podcasts of "expository" preaching. However, the sermon development process has failed to make the necessary leap to the homiletical, application-oriented outline. The preacher assumes I'm ready to engage the expositional insights gleaned from his exegetical prowess. The preacher's assumption of my interest is misguided. I don't (yet) care, not at any affective/emotional level of consciousness. Not at the level at which any transformational learning takes place. And, I'm a "trained professional" who teaches the Bible and homiletics. I'm supposed to care. But, mostly I don't, not given the besetting sins and circumstances that I bring with me to the sermon. If I don't care, I humbly submit a prosecuting attorney or an executive assistant with a family of three doesn't care either, not yet anyway. We need help transitioning from our week's worries into the meaning and application of the sermon's big idea. The homiletician has a sacred responsibility to persuade me to care.

Another reason we should stop starting the sermon with a reading and explanation of the text is because doing so undermines the hearer's confidence in understanding the Scriptures for themselves. "See," the hearer says to himself, "the Bible is far too culturally removed for me to access it's message. Good thing I have a smart pastor to help me try to make sense of it." Rather than empowering the hearer to observe, interpret, and apply the Scriptures for themselves, the text's accessibility is further comprised because of the "too assumptive" posture of the preacher.

Here's what I propose instead... start the sermon with a robust introduction (or first move) that answers the question, "What is at risk if the sermon hearer(s) fails to adopt the assertion being proposed today?" During my own homiletical studies 30 or so years ago, we were taught the introduction is meant to "arouse interest" or "address a need" with which the listeners could identify. This essay proposes that admonition fails to go far enough. Like it or not, the preacher is competing for "space" in the congregant's priorities. A profound sense of urgency must guide the development of the sermon's introduction/first move. The preacher should ask these questions from the person in the pew's perspective. Why does this matter? How will I or others fail to flourish if I neglect what the preacher is saying about whatever he/she is talking about in these next 30 minutes or so? These are the questions that should guide the sermon's start.

Let's revisit our levitical command. Here's a less-assumptive start to the sermon mandating "glean-free" field corners. "Would it trouble you if you discovered that your neighbor Lynn feels trapped in her own home?" begins Pastor Dave. "She cares for her aging mother and can't leave her alone for a minute. Would you be willing to help? Would you sit with her Mom while Lynn shops her grocery list. I think you would if you had margin in your schedule," Dave continues. "You would if you even knew Lynn. But your packed schedule and tight resources won't allow it. Ministry opportunities are being missed because our schedule and budget stay 'maxed out.' Lack of margin is keeping us from participating with God in the thrill of meeting the needs of those around us." Dave then transitions toward the text's trajectory, "Believe it or not, an instruction for Israel's farmers has implications for even us city dwellers today. We find this help buried in the law code of the Old Testament."

The relevance of today's message is now in play. This introduction alerts us that something is amiss in our human experience. We want (in our godly desires) to be a good neighbor. Intuitively we know we are victims of materialism and busyness. "Okay Pastor, you have our attention. Tell me, what the text says? Can you overcome my objections to live differently? Can you show me how I can apply it to my life? Because of your compelling first move, I now attach importance to today's text,' the sermon hearer says reflectively.

A noted critique of this article's assertion is that "urgency" is akin to "crying wolf" or yelling "fire" in a crowded room too often. Soon, the congregation grows calloused to the formula and the overstated "hype." Moderation is in order and variety is key to getting and maintaining attention. There are mild, moderate, and intense degrees of life crises and the preacher must authentically reflect these in the sermon's start. Also, the text itself may warrant enough interest that merits starting with the text. For example, mutilating the hand of a wife who touches the private parts of her husband's opponent from Deuteronomy 25:12 probably elicits sufficient interest to start with the text. The violence texts of the Old Testament trouble the soul and an apologetic explaining them, in addition to their contemporary relevance, can be assumed welcome.

Recall the joke about the woman who told her pastor as she left the building that he reminded her of Albert Einstein? "How so?" he asked. "They say no one could understand him either,"

she retorted. “It’s better to be helpful than to sound smart” is sage advice for preachers. If we stop starting the sermon with the text and start by showing the text’s relevance instead, it just might help sermon hearers respond (through Christ) to what the text is expecting.

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