



William C. Turner Jr. is associate professor for the practice of Homiletics at Duke University Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina

This essay is taken from his book, Scribble to Script: A Spirituality of Preaching, (Morris Publishing, 2003). In it Turner Smith provides his components of a spirituality of preaching.

From Scribble to Script: A Spirituality of Preaching

Preaching comes from the passion of God. God moves graciously toward the creation in an act that is straight from the heart. Like the gift of the Son, God's address is the outflow of love and compassion. In preaching the unsurpassed gift of God finds its continuation in zeal and work to save the world—to heal the creation and restore it into fellowship. It is addressed to the creature, whose vocation is to lead the creation into obedience to Christ.

As the faithful word of God, preaching has texture fashioned in a life of prayer, discipline, and devotion. Otherwise it is bland, sickening, and obnoxious. It is distasteful to the preacher, and even more so to the people. Few preachers have not had moments when this was their state. Even when people are polite, they are not fed. Only when the preacher draws from the wells of salvation, the deep subterranean streams of the Spirit, is there refreshment for thirsty souls. Deep must call to deep, or there is an act that amounts to forsaking the fountain of living water. Brackish water from broken cisterns is a double iniquity, as the prophet Jeremiah declares with prophetic force.

The script, which begins with scribble, is the instrument of preaching. It is not the sermon; the sermon is what is preached. This instrument may be a written essay; or it may be a set of notes with varying degrees of detail, written or unwritten. Experience and wisdom have dictated to me the prudential value of the essay—as it leaves no question regarding what was intended. Whatever form the script takes, it is an instrument with which the preacher should be comfortable and free. It holds together the tissue and texture, as with a living organism, the sacrifice that is being offered to God. Accordingly, it is important that the script breathe: what is inhaled into it during the preparation can be exhaled through the preacher and uttered as a life-giving word to the people of God.

The script that has vitality begins with scribble. In scribble the Spirit is free to brood, hover, inseminate fecundity for the creative work that precedes preaching. It is this pneumatic moment that sets preaching apart from ordinary speech, a lecture, an exercise in rhetoric, or an act of oratory. If preaching is for God, there must be openness for God to infuse it. Otherwise, it remains in a state of "tehom." The fruit remains unripened; the treasures remain buried, as with

an egg that does not hatch. Only following incubation is there release of power that permits fruitful speech—speech that performs, that brings forth anything God can call good.

Scribbling here is used as a metaphor to hold together a priceless moment in spirituality wherein meditation and spiritual discipline pass over into an act that is preparatory to speech. The image is that of a pen being moved to touch paper for the sake of capturing what is being received. This moment precedes excessive concern for how communication is to be given, or with what words the utterer will speak. It is at the intersection between the silence from which significant speech emerges and the second in which it may flee. As one grows in the devotion of scribbling, sensitivities to the arts and skills of communication take their place. But first and foremost, scribbling is rooted in the silence from which the living word emerges. It offers those openings through which the divine effluvium can flow; it offers a receptacle the Spirit can penetrate and saturate.

Accordingly, the preacher needs to be in the midst of some life-giving spiritual flow at all times. This may mean following the Daily Office, or some other discipline that carries one into the presence of God. I use the term "carries" with the intention of acknowledging that one's will and determination may be insufficient. Without such discipline it is possible to become so overtaxed with the details and duties of ministry till there is neglect of vital nourishment. But reading, studying, and preparing to preach are not sufficient. This is not to say that sermon preparation is not a spiritual discipline itself, but a larger, inexhaustible supply is needed for the sustenance of the preacher. The work of preparation can then be taken into the larger life of worship, rather than becoming a chore that is tedious and draining.

Along the regular discipline the effective preacher does well to remain in some "flow of preaching" at all times. This may mean following a common lectionary, preaching through a book (*lectio continua*), following some modified lectionary, or preaching from a theme to accomplish some purpose in the congregation. Preaching from some flow keeps the preacher from encountering the text as a stranger each week. The text becomes like a subject with whom there is regular interaction and intimacy. Only then does the text speak to yield secrets and knowledge given to one who can be trusted. From a practical standpoint, one does not have to "re-invent the wheel" each week.

Being prepared to preach requires touching the mystery that is not accessible on the preacher's terms. The mystery of God is given in self-disclosure in moments that are inherent to the mystery. Great risk is involved in presuming to set the time when the mystery can be touched. More time may be required by the mystery than has been allotted. If one makes the approach too late there may not be time to listen, to receive, and to be formed. This is the problem of preaching a draft that stinks, being caught in a bind that affords no alternative. When the mystery has not been touched there is no vitality, no power. Preaching that does not live cannot give life; preaching that has no power cannot give power.

Life-giving preaching springs from a spiritual state that is a place of saturation. This is ether into which one is carried and swept along by the text, and through which the preacher can be carried into the life of the people who hear the word. The instrument of the preacher is the script, but before there is the script, there is the scribble.

Scribble breaks the silence of meditation. One breaks the silence not so much from desire as from necessity. The silence must be broken. The advantage of scribble is that one does not have to have it right: it does not need to be all-together, in order, in shape for observation and critique. Sometimes it is good for the first acts of scribble to be confession of limitation, or the inadequacy one knows in the face of a text. It is amazing what can be taken up into a script to give it traction required to "go somewhere."

Questions about the difficulty of a text may well be included in the scribble. Faithful preachers often wrestle with a word they do not want to declare. Scribble may include a quarrel with God over why a word must be declared, prayer to be sustained for the undertaking. It may even include the rawness of a quarrel with the people. But it is so much better to voice such content in scribble than to let it seep into the script or leak out into the sermon. There is a sense in which scribble offers a moment for the searching and trying of the heart in the presence of God who knows the wickedness of the preacher. It is like prayer in sighs that are too deep for words, but that are suited to one's temperament and mood. Scribble is the extension of meditation in a moment when one can be real with God before standing in the congregation.

This is a moment of "firstness" in which one is confronted by the text as theophany—a burning bush, the word as fire, a boiling cauldron, a plumbline, a basket of figs. This is the midpoint between ineffability and speech. It is at this point that we find the prophet Ezekiel, when he remained speechless for seven days before uttering the oracle. Or, this is the point where the friends of Job appear: they break their silence before having anything worthy to say. False prophets ran before they were sent, and they did not take the time required to stand in the council of God.

Don't be afraid to scribble. Give yourself time to copy what is being inscribed in the spirit by the finger of God. This is the finger that has power to write in a tablet of stone. The finger of God possesses power to cast out devils. It also has power to write a new law in the heart—yea, to inscribe it in the members. Indeed, this is the work the Spirit purposes to do in the preaching of the word.

Tarry, tarry. Take time to scribble, to be moved upon and moved through by inspiration that can stagger the conduit. For some the precious moment will be one in which the scribble will surpass what can be grasped in the reflective state. Some content of preaching can be grasped by the work done with technical precision. Attention must be paid to correctness and the idiom required in order to be understood. But scribble precedes such moments of positive attention. It may well be the case that when the finished product is in hand the scribble will be discarded, but the finished product will be better for having gone through the steps.

Scribble is not to be understood as in opposition to technical work. Often this is what gives rise to the scribble in the first place. It is inclusive of the technical work that supplies the content required for powerful scripting. However, it affords the freedom to begin where one needs to start in the process. Responsible Christian preaching necessarily requires that one preach the word of God. Accordingly, there is a requirement to know what is being said in a discrete pericope. For this knowledge the critical tools are essential. One needs to know the historical

setting where possible, what gave rise to the text, the issues being addressed, the genre, the voice, and the audience. For this work commentaries can be extremely helpful—especially in the matter of checking the technical work. However, one must be cautious at the temptation to go to the commentary of another too soon, especially when the hermeneutical judgments and decisions of another interfere with the vitality of the word. The method of many commentators is to ascertain what can be known about a text relying on the claims concerning God.

Christian scripture is to be interpreted within the community of faith. This includes the great cloud of witnesses, which encompasses those who had faith before this era. While contemporary commentary can assist in identifying errors and underdevelopment in scientific and historical knowledge, they are not necessarily superior when it comes to theological insight and sensitivity into revelation. There is a real sense in which what we now call historical and systematic theology is the effort of the church throughout the ages to read the scriptures correctly. Hence these disciplines must also be appropriated to avoid the "private interpretation" of one generation and mute interlocutors from the ages.

Dogmatic theology has its place. It sets a perimeter around the speech that may be uttered by Christians. It forces every discourse to be consistent with beliefs that put one within or outside the boundary of truth. The creeds of the church are quite convenient in this regard. But they should be accompanied by knowledge of what they eliminate along with the confession. Dogmatics aids us in avoiding speaking errors, even when the intent is to simplify. Systematic theology is essential for insuring that whatever is said in one matter is consistent with what else must be said. In addition, it assists one in speaking in a way that is coherent with other knowledges, supplying a critique of them where necessary.

Christian preaching must not neglect to speak to the world. This is the prophetic task that discloses the subjectivity of those who hear the gospel. It exposes the wisdom of this world and casts down the false knowledge that opposes the gospel. In this regard the modern preacher must do like the ancient preacher Kohelteh, who gave his mind to know madness and folly. Here knowledge of the social sciences is crucial: it offers indispensable tools for analysis. The same is so of science. But these knowledges must also be known at their presuppositional level so they remain servants of the preacher rather than his or her master. For what we preach is Christ.

Attention is paid to the time of the liturgical year and the calendar—to holy days and holidays. The same is so of issues within the world, the nation, and the community being addressed. While it is not given for us to know the times and seasons reserved to the Father's power, it is for us to know the times and seasons in which we preach. These data are to be taken to the text, to see what the Lord has to say in the matter through the text that has been given. In seeking to hear from God through the text rather than hunting for a text that "fits the occasion," unanticipated beams of heaven guide our footsteps in this wilderness below.

Scribble enables one to bring to the task all the content required for scripting as a spiritual exercise. It is sort of like making a cake: all the ingredients need to be at one's finger-tip before the process of mixing batter begins. How horrible to be in the midst of mixing batter, only to discover that one has no eggs! True, you may have more than is needed for a specific

preparation, but it is better to have more than is needed than to find yourself without the crucial ingredient. Surely the time will come for making another cake.

Between scribbling and scripting, close and scrupulous attention is needed to the audience. That is, explicit attention is needed to the "world in front of the text." Matters of how a congregation hears are utterly important. This requires knowledge of the times, the cultures, the stimuli that operate, the level of knowledge, the images that resonate within the hearer. The preacher dare not ignore questions such as whether content is better grasped by a linear, logical presentation, or whether the cluster of images is more effective. Gaps and breaks in knowledge as one goes from one generation are likewise significant. If we speak of the Bay of Pigs, a sizeable portion of adults in many congregations will be lost. What triggers knowledge, and what associations enable comprehension are highly relevant issues.

Accordingly, between the scribble and the script careful attention must be given to order and flow. In some cases it may be advantageous to include some "scheme of recovery" in the scribble. One must be mindful of what must be said to be correct, and how it must be said to be heard. It is good to spend at least one sitting with the scribble for the purpose of imposing order and arrangement to the content. I am reminded here of the early days of computer programming, where students were required to produce a flow chart to show all the operations.

A few minds are nimble enough to do this in the head. Most of us will need some sort of code, something on the order of the "merge feature" on computers, or an old fashioned outline to insure the right flow from the perspective of the hearer. Such is the challenge of causing persons to see with their ears. What is achieved is "synthesia"—a unity of the senses, where the word speaks to the entire person. We do not preach to brains, intellects, or emotions, but to persons. The aim of preaching is to cause persons to see what we have been shown in the council of God. But what we have been given is words, and when the Spirit breathes through them the word of God is heard. This is a word that opens eyes and causes hearts to burn.

Scripting portends a spiritual space that one enters for the purpose of preparing what has been received as a gift from God to the people. One must make preparation to enter that space, as it cannot be gainsaid. What one has from scribble can be juxtaposed in such a manner that it opens this discursive space. Like mixing batter, the ingredients interpenetrate and interact with one another. Sugar and flour are in the cake, but they do not stand out as separate ingredients. The same is so with exegesis and analysis: they may blend in such a manner that when one speaks the words of the text the application to the congregation is apparent. Such a pattern is a mark of good preparation. The word buried in a specific text can speak to a given moment. An angle of vision not arrived at by chance can be achieved.

When preparation has been made well, scripting can be on the order of an "ecstatic moment" in which one steps outside her self and into her office (practice) as preacher. Here one finds words and phrases that are gifts. Illustrations make the gospel perspicuous. Images declare far more content than one was capable of understanding. The mystery touched, the preaching becomes the mouthpiece—the oracle of God, a flute through which the divine breath is blown. A preacher has cheated herself and her congregation if she has not reached this moment when she becomes the instrument of the Spirit's scripting.

The technical work insures against errors, even when wings are given to the spirit. Even in the state of ecstasy, one is not permitted to speak errors. Indeed, because God is faithful and cannot deny himself, the Spirit who leads into truth sensitizes against untruth. The technical work is something like one parallel rail on a set of train tracks: without both rails the train is wrecked.

This spiritual space allows one to enter into something of a mystical moment that can be compared to Taborian Light and a state of tranquility (*hesychasm*—to use the language of the East). This is where the work of scripting passes over into worship. This is a moment in which the pen glides over the page, or the fingers dance over the keyboard. The right word comes. The work is worship. Preparation can be as rewarding as delivery—which in some instances is anticlimactic.

This is the overflow seen in the call of Moses, who stood before the bush that burned without being consumed and received the commission from God. The ministry of Ezekiel is marked indelibly by the moment when he fell on his face as the vision was received and the word was inserted into his mouth. Throughout their labors, the disciples referred to the events of Tabor, when the light irradiated the Lord, and Moses and Elijah appeared while the voice spoke to proclaim him as the Son. On the Isle of Patmos John heard the voice like waters and saw in a vision the Risen Christ.

No gift to the preacher is greater than being moved to write and speak from a silence that is spiritual plentitude. This is silence before God that is everything but empty. It is a silence into which one carries all the labors they are capable of bringing, and it is filled by the presence of God. The silence is full and not empty. It is not the silence of one who has nothing to say; it is the silence of one who waits to know what must be said. It is a pregnant silence from which comes the speech that is the necessity of the moment.

This speech is the overflow of spiritual discipline: prayer, meditation, study, and reading. It is an investment in the ministry of the word where the preacher is the conduit. This is a gracious space, for one who knows they do not have sufficient words lives with confidence that the reservoir does not run dry. Time and time again, the source is replenished even as it flows.

The Risen Christ presents the living word and breathes out the Spirit, making use of the preacher as instrument. It is an act of worship done to the glory of God the Father who dwells in light inaccessible. The offering is like a sweet smelling savor, and the one who makes the offering is blessed by the fragrance.

Since preaching is an art form that relies on an extensive set of skills, the preacher must remain in search for methods and techniques to best accomplish the task. But more than all else, preparing to preach requires openness to the living word through which the Risen Christ, who breathes the Spirit into the church, speaks to the church.

