The goal of a sermon

How to Listen to a Sermon
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Every Sunday, something strange happens. A person stands up and talks. No surgery is performed. No legal contract executed. A person stands up and speaks, and a congregation sits and listens. And then everyone goes home. Except that's not exactly right. There is an exchange of goods. That is precisely what is happening. And the failure to see it is what produces so much preaching that does not know what it is.

For the failure has a name. Most preaching operates at the level of second order discourse. That is, it talks about God rather than speaking for God. It describes it, explains it, analyzes it, applies it, treats the sermon as an opportunity to say true things about the faith. Here's what this text means. Here's what Christians believe. Here's what you should do in light of it.

Thus, the preacher becomes a religious commentator. The congregation becomes an audience, and the scriptures become the subject matter under discussion, rather than the living address of the God who still speaks. First order discourse, that is preaching, is different. It is not talk about God. It speaks from within the relationship. As a participant in the conversation God has been conducting with his people since the very beginning.
The prophets did not offer religious commentary. They said, thus says the Lord, that is first order discourse. It is not a report on what God has said is the occasion of God's saying it. This is the task of the preacher. This is what the sermon is for. The struggle with a text of Scripture, until the text yields a word that can be spoken for God to this people in this particular moment.

Not a word about God. A word from God. The distinction sounds simple. It is not. It requires the preacher to do something genuinely difficult, which is to resist the pull toward the second order and stay in the first. The second order is safe. You can be right or wrong about what the text means, and the congregation can evaluate your argument and go home with something to think about.

The first order is exposed. To speak for God is to stake a claim that cannot be hedged. It is to hand something over rather than point at it from a distance. What is being handed over is

a promise, not a principle, not a moral directive, not a piece of advice for navigating contemporary life. A promise, a word that opens the future by referring to a specific content, namely the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the new creation.

It guarantees. Every text of the scriptures, when rightly proclaimed, contains such a promise. The preacher's task, what the sermon is for, is to find it, which means wrestling with the text until it yields not just meaning, but address. Not just information, but a word that can be spoken to particular people as good news. Good news not threatened. This is where so much preaching loses the plot.

The scriptures contain law as well as gospel, and the law has genuine work to do. It names the reality of the human situation. It exposes the distance between where we are and where God intends us to be. It strips away the comfortable fictions by which we organize our lives. But the law is not the final word. And the preacher who mistakes the law for the goods has handed over the wrong thing.

The law tells you where you stand. The gospel tells you where you are going and who is taking you there. The sermon exists for the second word. The word that opens the future rather than closing it. The word that can be received as a gift rather than verdict. The congregation does not need another verdict. They are living inside one already.

What they need is the promise that the verdict is not final. The one who is raised from the dead has opened a future that no human failure can foreclose. That promise is what the preacher is charged to deliver. It's what the sermon is for. Not to describe it, not to recommend it, not to suggest that it might be worth considering.

To hand it over, to say, on the authority of this text and the risen Christ who stands behind it, this is yours. The preacher cannot speak that word from a distance. She has to go into the text and not come out until she's found it. That struggle with the text. That refusal to settle for commentary when address is possible is itself the form of the preacher's faithfulness.

The congregation watches that struggle and experiences in it the authority of the scriptures as a living reality rather than a doctrinal claim. When the preacher finds the word and speaks it, something happens that is more than communication. The sermon becomes the event. It announces. The risen Christ speaks through the stammering lips of his servant, handing over to his bride what he has always been given: the promise that the future is his, that the last word is life, and that that life has already begun.