

THE PREACHER AS MIDWIFE

By Theresa A. Rickard, OP

The act of preaching is an opportunity to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ through inspiring the hearer and evoking a response. The preaching of the Gospel does not demand, persuade or coerce others to follow Jesus. Ideally, it captures the heart and imagination of the hearers wooing them into a deeper relationship with God and the faith community. The foundation of Christian faith and effective preaching is discovered in the reality of the Incarnation—God becoming flesh and living among us. Thus, the word of God is revealed in the human community, through history and in the depth of human experience. The preacher then serves as midwife, assisting in the birthing of the word from the womb of the community. The message that is brought forth is the meeting place between the biblical community and the contemporary gathering of believers. The preacher, a person of faith, gives voice to the word, speaking in the name of the church and for the building of the reign of God. Preaching is an awesome gift and with it comes the responsibility of honing, strengthening and expanding one's skills for the sake of renewing the faith of God's people.

At the foundation of one's understanding of the preaching event is one's theology of revelation—how God discloses divine mystery. This understanding shapes both preaching preparation and the event itself. The reality of the incarnation is essential to my understanding of preaching. The incarnation reveals to us that the promises of God are not only proclaimed but made flesh in the person of Jesus the Christ. The God who desires to know us and, to be known by us, self-communicates the mystery of divine love in creation and human history and in and through Christ and the Holy Spirit. As Christians, we believe God chose to reveal God's-self through a particular human being in a unique time, culture, and historical reality. Thus, God's living word is embodied and disclosed in the ordinariness of life. Preaching, then, as Catherine Hilkert states, is the naming of grace in the world. Preaching is an event that announces God's activity in the struggles and blessings of daily life and denounces evil and injustice. Liberation theologians articulate this truth in defining preaching as both annunciation and denunciation—announcing the liberating truth of Christ and denouncing the darkness of oppression.

I understand preaching to be an event where the preacher serves as midwife to the community entrusted with giving birth to the liberating word of God. In my Master of Divinity thesis, *Preacher As Midwife*, I explored this metaphor in depth from both a theological and biblical foundation. The midwife is one who companions, listening attentively to the heartbeat of both mother and child. She is self-

possessed; she knows who she is and remains poised to react. The midwife is present to the mother in her pain and assists her in her struggle to usher in new life. The preacher is called to be midwife for the community facilitating the birthing of a transformative word. The preacher as facilitator stands with and in the community naming the grace that is present. The image of preacher as midwife draws attention to both the reality of the world as graced and the centrality of the community in the process of bringing forth the preached word.

If the community is the locus of God's grace, then reflection on culture, race, social location, and the daily struggles of a particular assembly is essential to the hearing of God's word today. The study of the reality of the hearers is not merely to make a sermon relevant, but it is essential to the revelation of God. Thus, both the shaping of the message and the way it is articulated is to be in dialogue with the hearers. The mystery of God is discovered and drawn from the womb of the community.

The process of preaching is a circular movement where the biblical and contemporary communities are kept in constant tension so as to shed light and give voice to God's word today. This movement begins with serious reflection on the community and the issues currently impacting them, solid biblical exegesis, sound theological reflection and creative thinking on the most effective way to en flesh the message. This process is about naming grace as well as standing in grace—the grace of the Holy Spirit. The breaking open of the word without the Holy Spirit has no lasting power. The role of the Holy Spirit is not only located throughout salvation history but also continues to be active and alive today in prayer, in study, in the preparation of the sermon, in the hearer, in the preacher, and in the preaching event itself. The word that is anointed by the Spirit has the power to transform the identity of the faithful during the preaching event. It also embodies a power and a richness that moves beyond church walls to concrete action in and for the world.

The social location of a particular group impacts how people hear the Word and thus how the preacher communicates it. Paying careful attention to the generative themes of the gathered believers assists in the process of shaping the message. It also helps in presenting the word in a way that captures people's hearts. Generative themes, according to Paulo Friere, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, are those that energize a particular group: issues, values, and beliefs that are critical to them. Generative themes and effective ways to re-present these themes are discovered by venturing out among the people—shopping in the bodega, meeting people on the street, listening for images, metaphors, and stories that are meaningful to a particular community. The preacher is called to accompany the people and

discover with them the wisdom of God in the heartbeat of human experience.

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