

Preaching and the Imagination

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There are two statements my preaching students must tire from hearing yet I do not tire from saying. The first is, “In your sermons, linger in the text, loiter in the congregation, and live in the world.” This about immersion in the Word of life for the life of the world. The second statement is, “Someone must suffer for the sermon. If it is not the preacher who is willing to pay the price then it will be the congregation.”¹ This is about sacrifice for the sake of the Word that it might be heard by the world. Yet I find preachers resist immersion in the Word and are reluctant to make a sacrifice for the Word. Competing ministry demands and expectations are a part of it. An unspoken pressure (real or imagined) from congregants to “entertain us” lurks beneath the surface. Compounding these pressures is a growing and confounding level of biblical illiteracy among seminary graduates and congregations. Of all the forces competing against the creation of sound and life-giving sermons, it is biblical illiteracy that is the most sinister. The people of God are losing the knowledge of their native language. A colleague insightfully describes some of the factors that have led to this concerning level of biblical illiteracy. They include

- preaching being modelled as life lessons which may or may not connect to Scripture;
- preaching being shaped to engender a primarily emotional response;
- preaching to reinforce the cultural status quo rather than being open to Scripture critiquing culture;
- an almost complete lack of familiarity with biblical material, themes, and the shape of the canon;
- in some cases, viewing the Bible as a ‘magic’ book;
- the lack of good role models of men and women using Scripture well in all aspects of life;
- in our context (New Zealand), the anti-intellectual strand still carrying weight (and a distrust of biblical studies especially);
- an increasing number of pastors with no biblical training – especially in small non-affiliated churches;
- more than a loss of confidence in Scripture, the sense that it just isn’t relevant or authoritative; and
- the idea that engaging with Scripture well is too hard and takes too much time.²

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I would add an eleventh factor, the downside of smartphone technology. Scripture is reduced to a seven-inch screen and a powerful Bible search facility, with the result that people do not know how to navigate the Bible. They lose a sense of the overarching biblical narrative. It's akin to driving while only looking at the screen of your GPS/Navman and not out of the windshield. The effect of such biblical illiteracy is not a dormant condition. In writing of those agents of the Word of God, the prophets, Abraham Heschel describes a condition that we face in a context marked by the effects of biblical illiteracy:

What baffles the prophet is the disparity between the power and the impact of God and the immense indifference, unyieldingness, sluggishness, and inertia of the heart. God's thunderous voice is shaking heaven and earth, and man [sic] does not hear the faintest sound. The Lord roars like a lion (Amos 3:8). His word is like fire, like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces (Jer. 23:29), and the people go about unmoved, undisturbed, unaware.³

There is also an accompanying lack of wonder concerning the majesty and mystery of God insofar as God speaks through the Scriptures. What is an appropriate response to this? Nothing less than the nurturing of imagination in our preaching will do. Eugene Peterson states the case incisively:

As we cultivate a participatory mind-set in relation to our Bibles, we need a complete renovation of our imaginations. We are accustomed to thinking of the biblical world as smaller than the secular world. Tell-tale phrases give us away. We talk of "making the Bible relevant to the world," as if the world is the fundamental reality and the Bible something that is going to help it or fix it. We talk of "fitting the Bible into our lives" or "making room in our day for the Bible," as if the Bible is something that we can add on to or squeeze into our already full lives. . . . Our imaginations have to be revamped to take in this large, immense world of God's revelation in contrast to the small, cramped world of human "figuring out."⁴

The revamping of our imagination comes about by a death and resurrection of our imagination. This requires immersion in the Scriptures and preparedness to sacrifice ourselves to the task. The fruit is a revamped imagination attuned to the wonders of God mediated through the Word of God. I have found that one agency for such transformation is through the prayer disciplines of *lectio divina* and Ignatian Gospel Contemplation. Both disciplines empower the preacher's sermon preparation by informing, reforming, and transforming the imagination.

IMAGINATIVE PREACHING

In 2011 I completed my doctoral research, which explored what would happen if preachers first prayed the biblical text at hand before engaging in exegetical study for the sermon.⁵ Over a four-month period, seven vocational preachers-pastors engaged in praying the biblical passage using *lectio divina* and Ignatian Gospel

Contemplation. Both these prayer disciplines are increasingly popular and are being utilized in a range of contexts by a range of practitioners. However, there is a danger in their becoming popularized; they can suffer from a dilution and disconnect from their original format. Something is lost in translation and transmission. As far as possible, in my research and ministry, I have sought to keep the original and historical movements with both prayer disciplines.⁶

- For *lectio divina* the movements are:
- *Lectio* – Read the text aloud multiple times. Listen for one word or phrase that captures your attention.
- *Meditatio* – Ponder the text. Question and interrogate that one word/phrase chosen. Why did it capture your attention? What comes to mind as it is pondered? What associations and memories are evoked? What insights are formed? Etc.
- *Oratio* – Pray in response to the text. Respond with whatever prayer seems most apt. It might be a prayer of intercession, or praise, or gratitude, or supplication, or confession, or lament . . . the Spirit will guide you.
- *Contemplatio* – Rest in and live the text. Simply sit with God and the effect of the meditation.

For Ignatian Gospel Contemplation, the movements are:

- Preparatory prayer – Quieten your heart and be aware of God’s love towards you.
- 1st Prelude (subject) – Read the biblical text aloud multiple times.
- 2nd Prelude (composition of place) – Use your five physical senses to imagine what the biblical scene would be like. What would you see, hear, feel, taste, and smell if you were there?
- 3rd Prelude (desired grace) – What spiritual insight or experience do you hope to be graced with? The desired grace needs to be in keeping with the biblical narrative being prayed about.
- Contemplation – Run the biblical story through your imagination like a movie and choose to be either an observer of the story or a character in the story.
- Colloquy – Finish your time of prayer speaking with Jesus as “one friend with another.”

For my 2011 research, I trained the seven research participants in how to pray using these two disciplines; the expectation was that each preacher would spend fifteen to thirty minutes praying the biblical text before continuing their sermon preparation in their usual way. Each research participant preached ten sermons during this the four-month period: at least four sermons needed to be based on *lectio divina* and four sermons based on Ignatian Gospel Contemplation. The group met once

a month and reflected on the practice, and ten major findings emerged. The preachers discovered they were:

- renewed by a new sense of love for Christ and his call,
- renewed by a new sense of authenticity when preaching,
- renewed by a new relationship with Scripture,
- repositioned with reference to prioritising sermon preparation in the presence of time pressure and pastoral demands,
- repositioned in relation to connecting personal devotions with sermon preparation,
- repositioned by newfound grace,
- repositioned by timing exegesis to take place after praying the Scriptures,
- reoriented to new connections with the congregation,
- reoriented to imagination fueled by wonder, and
- reoriented as *contemplatives in action*.

In recent years, I have facilitated a similar exercise with ministers-in-training. This article describes that experience and offers this method to others engaged in the formation of preachers.

PREACHING WITH IMAGINATION: A 2022 ASSIGNMENT

I am a faculty member with the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership, which is the training institution for the ministers and leaders in the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. Our programme for training ministers is a two-year graduate intern programme. During the programme, interns are placed in church settings, and 75% of their time is dedicated to day-to-day ministry and mission. The balance of their time, 25%, is focused on projects and assignments generated by seven courses taught during the programme. These courses are taught during regular residential block courses throughout their time as an intern. One of those courses is Preaching the Scriptures. The last assignment for this course is the largest.

During one of the residential block courses, a six-hour module exposes the interns to *lectio divina* and Ignatian Gospel Contemplation, and the prayer disciplines' relationship to preaching and the imagination. Six months later, the interns submit an assignment in which they have preached two sermons based on *lectio divina* and two sermons based on Ignatian Gospel Contemplation.

For each sermon, they are to follow a pattern:

Before (500 words): The intern utilizes *lectio divina* or Ignatian Gospel Contemplation to pray the biblical text at hand before doing any other sermon preparation. They then journal the effect their prayer has had on their sermon preparation. The journalling is free of any writing conventions. In the spirit of true spiritual journalling, grammar and sentence structure are not a concern.

If the prayer used was *lectio divina*, the prayer during *oratio* needs to be recorded. If the prayer was Ignatian Gospel Contemplation, then the 3rd Prelude (desired grace) needs to be recorded. Often *oratio* or the 3rd Prelude proves to be the DNA of the final sermon.

During (1500–2000 words): The intern writes a full sermon manuscript, allowing the rest of the sermon preparation and content to be naturally influenced by the effects of the prayer.

After (500 words): In the week after preaching the sermon, the intern journals any post-sermon thoughts, experiences, feedback, prayer, etc. This journal entry needs to include a reflection on what effect – if any – the prayer during *oratio* or the grace desired under the 3rd Prelude had on the sermon.

These three steps are to be engaged with for all four sermons. Once the work has been completed for the four sermons, there is one more piece of work to be completed.

Hereafter (750 words): The intern writes an overall reflection concerning the effect on their imagination, relationship with Scripture, and ministry practice. The reflection is to be formatted by finishing these statements:

- From praying the Scriptures by utilising *lectio divina* and Ignatian Gospel contemplation, the effect on my imagination has been . . . (250 words).
- From preaching the Scriptures by utilising *lectio divina* and Ignatian Gospel Contemplation, the effect on my relationship with Scripture has been . . . (250 words).
- From preaching the Scriptures by utilising *lectio divina* and Ignatian Gospel Contemplation, the effect on my ministry practice has been . . . (250 words).

Lecturer beware: the word count for each student’s assignment is significant. The work entails approximately 6000–8000 words for the sermon manuscripts and 1750 words for the journal entries. I recommend that you read the journal entries closely and read the sermons in more of a cursory fashion, looking for evidence of the effects of the prayer. The focus for the assignment is seeing how the two ancient prayer disciplines impact the student’s engagement with the Scriptures and their imagination.

The cohort of five interns completing this assignment in 2022 are second-year interns within six months of completing their training. The five interns represent a range of ethnicities, ministry and mission experience, and age and stage of life.

All five are married, with some having adult children, school-aged, or pre-school-aged children. Two interns have had over ten years’ experience as missionaries in Turkey. One intern is Chinese and was converted through the ministry of U.S. Baptist missionaries while living in China. He became a member of the underground church before emigrating to New Zealand. The cultures represented among the interns are Pacific, Asian, New Zealand European, and European. All interns came into the programme with wide and varied ministry experience. Their exposure to and experience of fulfilling a regular preaching ministry was understandably limited. As a cohort, their combined class culture was one marked by above-average theological aptitude.

The observations for this article are drawn from the “Hereafter” reflections of the assignments.

FINDINGS FROM THE 2022 ASSIGNMENTS

The final assignments from all five interns revealed a recurring theme. Through the agency of *lectio divina* and Ignatian Gospel Contemplation, these preachers bore witness to God's work and voice to their congregations. The effect of their prayer was a new level of authenticity and personal presence in their sermons. For two interns, this assignment fell due at the time of close family bereavements. The prayer and related sermons helped the interns engage with their grief. Preacher and congregation both found themselves utterly submitted to the message of Scripture; it was as if the biblical text preached itself. Through the process of immersing themselves in the Scripture at hand, the interns lost themselves in the life of the text and found a new way of being present when they subsequently preached. One intern wrote:

Because the exercises are so prayerful in nature I relaxed and allowed my imagination to go where it might not have otherwise. I felt able to trust the Spirit's guiding and keeping, and to take risks with my imagination, daring to go where I might not have otherwise.

Yet another wrote:

Furthermore, the more I contemplate and meditate on Scripture, the more I am personally involved, the more I myself am made alive. . . . It is from this personal involvement and conviction that I can preach with integrity, passion and persuasion. Another intern wrote in a similar vein:

I was surprised how each occasion awakened me in unfamiliar ways, allowing me to enter into the scene, almost reliving a portion of the account as if I was there. I also experienced an increased sense of wonder, as I engaged with and appropriated the words in new yet meaningful ways. While my imagination took me beyond the contours of the text, worrying me a little on one occasion, it remained faithful and harmonious to it. My sense of authenticity grew as a result, because what I was speaking of was birthed in what the Holy Spirit had illuminated and connected to me so personally.

As is evident by this last quote, there can be an underlying anxiety about straying beyond the bounds and constraints of what we would term sound exegesis and good hermeneutics. Yet the very acknowledgement of such anxiety is a safeguard. And of course, after the prayer exercise, exegetical work is carried out and any corrections will take place then.

Understandably, the pressure to dispense with the prayer and just "get on with it" and begin commentary work was very real. Such pressure is compounded by the other demands of the week. To begin sermon preparation in a slow, considered, and prayerful pedestrian pace is counterintuitive if not countercultural. One intern profoundly describes the anxiety felt going into prayer and yet the advantages of having done so:

With so many other demands in the week I always harbour a wee fear that I won't have enough time to complete my message. It's tempting to go straight for the commentaries and to pursue a sense of direction informed only by my own distracted

head! These two contemplative approaches had the beautiful effect of slowing me down. . . . Any temptation to turn my preparation into something other than an encounter with Jesus was confronted, and it was apparent again that it was all about him. Key, however, was the fact that being oriented to Christ was more than an intellectual posture, I *was* actually engaging with Christ in the early stages of my preparation, and this set the course for the rest of my work.

This is one of the main features that interns reported in their reflections: an encounter with Christ during their prayer which affected the rest of their sermon preparation. Of course, the tangible sense of God's presence will not always be experienced, yet for this cohort of interns it was a marked pattern. What is especially pleasing is that their experience took place amid the enemy of the soul and ministry: busyness. The reflections showed evidence that sermon preparation was expanded and deepened. The prayer exercises did not replace study; they enlivened them. One intern confessed:

[The prayer disciplines] helps me avoid the trap of biblicism or a Spiritless, overly analytical interpretation that may seem clever and pious but actually fail to bring forth God and leave the listener in want of a life-giving encounter with him.

Another intern reflected:

From personal experience attempting this way of preaching now a handful of times, it is hard! It is hard to engage a part of the brain that has been culturally suppressed by unimaginative and uncreative conventions in the art of preaching. However, it's hard to imagine that I would do it any other way!

Not appealing to the imagination seems as fruitless for both preacher and congregation as Sisyphus' eternal task of rolling a stone up the fiery hills of hell – it's simply unfruitful!

Perhaps, regardless of which subjects we teach in seminaries and formational training, we as lecturers can sometimes be left wondering if we are making a difference. We have those moments of wondering if students' convictions, practice, and vision are at all affected by what we teach. A bold statement: as long as *lectio divina* and Ignatian Gospel Contemplation are taught well, this assignment never fails to produce fruit that demonstrate the students encounter Christ and their ministry is affected for the better. Along with this, the interns pay closer attention to the biblical text. One of my constant pieces of feedback concerning their sermons is to linger in the text and to allow the biblical passage to speak for itself. I often say to them, "The passage of Scripture is trying to tell you how to preach it. Listen to it!"

Examples from this current batch of assignments show evidence of the interns slowing down their preparation and immersing themselves deeper in the text they are preaching from. The agency of the 3rd Prelude (desired grace) and *oratio* are proving to be a space in which revelation can take place:

Particularly fruitful . . . were the first and second movements of *lectio divina*. During *lectio* and *meditatio* I discovered that I was opening myself, and eventually others, more to the living and active revelation of God.

The Third Prelude of Ignatian Gospel Contemplation deserves mention here. On each occasion I found that the requirement to ask specifically for grace in a relevant or pressing area was immensely fruitful. Albeit to a lesser extent, this was true also for the *oratio* prayer.

Associated with this is the preacher's greater appreciation of the interconnectedness of who and what is in view in the act of preaching. One intern arrived at this realisation with profundity:

To me, imagination is like having all four parties – God, Scripture, myself, and my intended audience – sit down together and dialogue about the theme(s) at hand. It is a living ongoing conversation

This insight is what Walter Brueggemann speaks of as the “great triad of pastor–prayer–congregation.” Brueggemann continues, “This is pastoral theology at its best, inviting pastors and church leaders to let the power of the Spirit – via the generative force of Scripture – to be in defining play in ministry.”⁷

Another pleasing outcome of this exercise has been the reporting of interns that the prayer and engagement with Scripture overflows to other aspects of their wider ministry. This was an unexpected feature of the original research findings in 2011. Now in 2022, with a smaller research group and thus a smaller research data sample, the same finding emerges. Interns reported such experiences as this:

With both of these [prayer] exercises though, I think it also helps make me more alert to the smaller details that might be missed in Scripture; attentive to an underlying idea that is not so explicit. I wonder if this translates into wider ministry practice. For instance, in my pastoral engagements and maybe just in my general fellowship engagements and beyond.

At the very least, they do draw my attention back to the person/s of God in the first instance and that has to have a positive effect on my ministry practices.

Another intern described how the sermon preparation infused the rest of the worship service:

My [prayer] experiences and notes affected much more of the worship service than expected; with calls to worship, song selections, communion and benedictions all being influenced, or specially crafted, by the preparatory processes of those weeks.

I must confess that such an outcome comes as a surprise to me. The purpose of preaching is to affect life so that we live “according to the Scriptures.” Why then is it such a surprise that other areas of ministry and life are impacted by this prayer discipline? Does it betray within me an instinctive and compartmentalised approach to ministry. I hope not! Yet the reflections from my interns causes me to revisit my own convictions and ministry practice.

In all this, we do need to acknowledge the age-old issue with prayer; it can be hard to pray because it is easy to be distracted. Indeed, both *lectio divina* and Ignatian Gospel Contemplation were developed in part as a corollary to the universal experience of distractions in prayer. One intern honestly described this battle. His reflections were a highlight about a lowlight. In one part of his reflection, he considers

whether he will continue the practice of preparing his sermons through the agency of *lectio divina* and Ignatian Gospel Contemplation. He writes:

I'm loathe to think that I am at odds with the work required to delve into Scripture. A romantic notion is that my love for Scripture is the overriding theme that describes my relationship with it. But even with these reflections and journals, a tension is evident between the work (maybe cost is a more apt word here), and my love and desire to be immersed in it. . . . Although I am an advocate to the employment of the imaginations, I think I personally need time to settle into these sessions, to really breathe and sit and reflect for a day or two as I go about my normal routines. I suppose this is why I have a little trouble settling when I'm constrained by outside pressures, maybe also why I had to keep my head in check when my heart embraced the process (especially when it came to Ignatian Gospel Contemplation).

Compounding this struggle is the deeply intimate experience that can unfold in prayer. The preacher delves deep into the Word, and the Word in turn "penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 12:4). The problem then becomes one of how much transparency, vulnerability, and self-disclosure is appropriate in the sermon. The transition from prayer experience to the preaching event can be fraught. One intern wrote:

So, what's stopping me from embracing [*lectio divina* and Ignatian Gospel Contemplation] going forward? The tricky thing . . . is how the process translates into the written and delivered sermon. Translating that which occurs so deeply within me, that which is so profoundly personal, that which God speaks to me in a vernacular known only to me is an exercise in knowing the people to whom God has called me and learning the language of the people among whom I find myself. Preaching into a context is always going to be harder than preaching out of a context, or from within a context.

Perhaps the way ahead is to reflect on Cardinal John Newman's challenge, "Nothing that is anonymous will preach."⁸

CONCLUSION

The effect of this preaching exercise has been a tangible awakening within the interns towards the Word of God written and the Word of God incarnate. The relationship with God and Scripture has deepened and been infused with new life and passion. The interns report a change in their imagination, an imagination being formed and transformed by the living Word of God. The exercise was limited to only four sermons. Yet the effect is in excess of such a limited exercise. And while the exercise could be "tainted" by interns wanting to achieve the best grade possible by being as positive as possible, this did not appear to come through in their submitted work. Their journal reflections had integrity, and they reported honestly about difficulties and struggles when they occurred. Also, knowing the interns because of the programme they are engaged in, their written work was consistent with what is experienced with them as people outside the moment of formal assessment. In short,

this assignment has moved these preachers from solely the science of preaching towards the art of preaching.

The final word deserves to be given to one intern who described the accessibility and inaccessibility of the Scriptures as a result of his experience with this assignment:

[*Lectio divina* and Ignatian Gospel Contemplation] have made me fall more in love with Scripture. It has made me realise afresh that the Scripture has a harmonious coherence and interconnectedness and an unsearchable richness and depth that we can't plumb.

Now, *that* is the kind of preacher I want to listen to!

¹ David L. Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching: Identifying the Issues in Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 89.

² Dr Stephen Garner, Academic Dean, Laidlaw College, New Zealand.

³ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 240.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat this Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 67.

⁵ My doctoral thesis was published as *Imaginative Preaching: Praying the Scriptures So God Can Speak Through You* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2015) and, in a more accessible and readable version, as *Live, Listen, Tell: The Art of Preaching* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Preaching Resources, 2017).

⁶ There is an abundance of publications describing *lectio divina* and Ignatian Gospel Contemplation. For *lectio divina*, I recommend M. Basil Pennington, *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures* (New York: Crossroad, 1998); Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Liguori, MO: Triumph Books, 1996); Peterson, *Eat this Book*, 79–117.

For Ignatian Gospel Contemplation, I recommend William A. Barry, *Letting God Come Close: An Approach to the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2001); David Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality* (New York: Orbis, 2000); James Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (New York: HarperOne, 2012); and Dean Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times: New Perspectives on the Transformative Wisdom of Ignatius of Loyola* (New York: Crossroad, 2004).

Keep in mind that *lectio divina* in the form we are familiar with was developed in the twelfth century and had been in use for 1000 years prior. Ignatian Gospel contemplation was developed by Ignatius Loyola in the sixteenth century as a part of his *Spiritual Exercises*. Regarding Ignatian Gospel Contemplation, it is prudent to remember that it is but one aspect of a comprehensive spiritual retreat. While it stands alone as a way of praying the Scriptures, it also belongs to a family of other spiritual practices contained in the *Ignatian Spiritual Exercises*.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, personal communication and written endorsement of my *Imaginative Preaching*, 18 June 2015.

⁸ William Willimon, "Foreword," in *Preaching Autobiographically: Connecting the World of the Preacher and the World of the Text*, ed. David Fleer and David Bland (Abilene, TX: ACU, 2001), 13.