The Passion of God
Preaching and the Power of the Spirit

Mary Catherine Hilkert, O.P.

This theological essay focuses on the power of the Spirit in the event of preaching—in both the experience of the homilist and the congregation. It is the Spirit which allows us to name the grace present in our world. But in the practice of “naming grace” we should never seek a cheap grace which ignores the sense in people’s lives of God’s absence and the reality of suffering in human life.

Preachers often find themselves in the kind of situation that Flannery O’Connor once described after writing “Everything That Rises Must Converge.” In a letter to a friend she confessed:

I’d like to write a whole bunch of stories like that, but once you’ve said it, you’ve said it, and that about expresses what I have to say on That Issue. But pray the Lord will send me some more. I’ve been writing for sixteen years and I have the sense of having exhausted my original potentiality and being now in need of the kind of grace that deepens perception, a new shot of life or something (O’Connor 1979, 468).

The “kind of grace that deepens perception” describes well the anointing of the Holy Spirit needed by both preacher and gathered assembly if the words of

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the preacher are to be, for the community, words of “spirit and life” (John 6:63). While preachers and textbooks on preaching often focus on the power of the word, far less frequently do they reflect on the Holy Spirit as the passionate fire, the compassionate presence, and the strong driving wind empowering both the preaching and the hearing of the Gospel.

Identifying preaching as the art of “naming grace” may help us attend more carefully to where the Spirit of God is active in ordinary human lives and throughout creation. The same Spirit who stirs up God’s “passion for life” throughout the universe is the one who is the source of all desire and energy to announce the Good News enfleshed in Jesus. But our proclamation of Good News becomes “cheap grace” unless we grapple with what it means to preach the Gospel in the face of the absence of God in our world and in so many aspects of our lives. How can we preach the presence of God in the midst of the passion of our suffering world? Both hearers and preachers of the word share the experience of the twofold presence and absence of God and struggle to discern where the Spirit of God is moving the community. Further, that focus on the community’s experience reminds us that the passion to preach is not an individual experience of the preacher, but rather a gift given by the Spirit in and through the community and for the nourishment of the community.

The Presence of the Spirit: Preaching as Naming Grace

Classic theologies of preaching—both Protestant and Catholic—take as their starting point the power of the word of God. Recent attention to the long-overlooked role of the Holy Spirit in creation, history and Church as well as the turn to human experience as starting point for theological reflection recommend another possibility. How might we understand and identify what we are about as preachers if we were to begin with the conviction of Karl Rahner that “the Holy Spirit runs ahead of the preacher”? Then the task of the preacher becomes not announcing a foreign word with authority, but “naming the grace” already present and at work in people’s ordinary lives and in our so-called secular universe so that we may recognize and celebrate that indeed, “the world is charged with the grandeur of God” and live accordingly. But as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins describes the dilemma:

Why do men now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

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The task of the preacher, to continue to borrow from Hopkins, is precisely to help us name and celebrate that for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings (Hopkins 1953, 27).

A fundamental role attributed to the Spirit in trinitarian theology is that of opening the hearts of the hearers of the word that we might recognize and respond to the Good News. It is the Spirit who enables us to hear “an echo of the gospel” in the stories of everyday human lives and to name as “paschal mystery” what could appear as merely a mix of bad luck and good fortune, as human efforts to heal broken lives and spirits, or as political negotiations to restore right relations between nations.

The sequence of Pentecost names the Spirit as *lumen cordium* and *lux beati-sima*—light of the heart, most blessed light—suggesting that the “fire of the Spirit” can bring to light what otherwise remains in the shadows. This fire enables us to see creation and human life as sacraments of God’s presence, to identify the “footprints of the Trinity” that Augustine assured us are to be found everywhere throughout creation. The Spirit focuses the lenses of our imagination so that we can see the world of nature as God’s beloved creation and the divine at work precisely in and through the human.

The Spirit enkindles the passion of the preacher by the “kind of grace that deepens perception” expanding our awareness of God’s own passion for life, God’s embrace of creation, God’s desire for relationship—all of which culminates in the Incarnation. If the God who is “mad with love” as the mystics assert, has been foolish enough to embrace the human situation in all its dimensions and to become one with the world itself, surely preachers are called to likewise.

*Gaudium et spes*, Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, gives one clue about where and how preachers will discover the passion to preach both “when convenient and when inconvenient” (2 Tim 4:2). The opening paragraph declares: “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts” (n. 1).

Preachers pay attention to the human story and story of the earth because they know that God has chosen to “pitch a tent” there. But preachers attend to the experience of humanity and the cries of the earth while listening for the echo of another story—an echo of the Gospel—because they are convinced that God’s
passion for life took flesh in the person, life and ministry of Jesus. Preachers listen to, but also reconfigure, daily human experience in light of the life and death of Jesus. Preaching becomes then the retelling of the story of Jesus, but as that story continues to be lived out in the power of the Spirit in our world today. The Spirit’s role of bringing all things to remembrance and serving as advocate and comforter for a community called to live in hope are clearly interrelated. Operating in the power of the Spirit, the preacher summons the community to remember the Good News of what God has done in the past. But in the biblical sense of “remembering” the event occurs again now. In the very ritual of remembering, new energy is released for faithful living into the future.

That faithful living is an integral dimension of the preaching of the Good News of salvation. Jesus proclaimed in words the same message that he embodied in his liberating lifestyle and in his very person. He forgave sins not only by words of forgiveness, but by eating with sinners. He announced the healing mercy of God by touching lepers. Jesus challenged preconceived social roles by talking with and loving Samaritans, tax collectors, prostitutes. He brought glad tidings to the widow of Naim when he touched her son and returned him to life. He preached liberty to those captive to demons and sickness through his healing ministry. He proclaimed a year of favor, every time he created a feast around the table with friends, with the one who would betray him, with his benefactors and social outcasts, and with sinners who were thought to defile the sacredness of the meal. At the heart of that “shocking behavior” was his experience of the Spirit prompting his passionate preaching of the reign of a God whose compassion knows no bounds.

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Throughout the Gospels Jesus’ own parables serve as a paradigm for how the preacher is called to “name the grace” of God's shocking abundance breaking through in the midst of ordinary human situations and in the mysteries of creation. He used images of how trees grow, or seeds sprout, or vines and branches are connected from “the Book of Nature” and common ordinary experiences of broken family relations, employer-employee negotiations, friends who arrive at inconvenient times, farmers planting seeds, and women baking bread and searching for the lost to “break open” his hearers’ imaginations. His parabolic preaching offered a glimpse of a deeper power at work in life and in nature—the
power of the living God he knew as “Abba” whose passion is the flourishing of all creation, whose glory is human persons and all of creation “fully alive.” Jesus “named grace” in a way that caught his hearers off-guard and left them with the question with which all effective preaching leaves us: Are we willing to live by this “new logic of grace”?

With his rejection and execution, however, all that Jesus proclaimed was called into question, most fundamentally his promise that Abba’s passion is for life and flourishing. The Spirit who had been source and energy of his life seemed to be absent; his mission in human terms appeared to be a failure. Preachers who would follow in his footsteps today will be able to announce with passion and conviction the radical hope that God’s Spirit sustains those who live in the shadow of death only if we ourselves have “walked in the valley of darkness” and have discovered the God who has gone ahead of us even there.

We turn then to another meaning of “the passion of God” and the single greatest challenge to preachers identified by Nathan Scott as “the strange and brutal haphazardness with which it seems at times, acute misfortune is distributed amongst persons [and, we might want to add, within nature itself]” (Scott, 7). How do we speak of “the passion of God” for life amid the crucifixion of the world?

The Passion of God and the Passion of the World

In the context of personal and global suffering, both preachers and hearers of the Word find ourselves confronted again with what Karl Barth identified in 1922 as “every hearer’s question” about the Good News: “Is it true?” Remarking on the contrast between what the liturgy proclaims and people’s concrete lives, Barth drew the following challenge for any preacher or believer:

The whole liturgy says: God is present. The whole situation witnesses, cries, simply shouts of it, even if in the minister or people there arises questioning, wretchedness, or despair. . . . But what does “God is present” mean in the face of the great riddle of existence? . . . Is it true?—this talk of a loving and good God who is more than one of the friendly idols? . . . A passionate longing to have the word spoken that promises grace is the desire of every church-goer no matter how they express their want in so-called real life (Barth, 107–109).

We all long to have our deepest desires and hopes fulfilled, to believe amid the complexity and suffering of our lives, that as the poet Emily Dickinson once proclaimed: “This world is not conclusion” (Dickinson, 135). Hearers of the word come to church not in order to be entertained, much less to be lectured or scolded, but rather hoping to hear a word that will enable them to enter more deeply into
the paschal mystery that is already there in their daily lives. We long for the word that promises that death is not the end, that forgiveness and reconciliation are possible, that work for justice and peace is not in vain, that the power of love really is the mystery at the heart of the universe.

If the primary task of the preacher in the midst of the assembly is to name the presence and power of God here and now, the lens through which the preacher interprets that experience—or perhaps better the filter through which we hear the story of this community—is that of the biblical stories and liturgical symbols of grace. And, for Christians, at the heart of both stands the cross. Pointing to the “folly” of our baptismal identity, Paul’s Letter to the Romans questions us again at every Easter vigil: “Are you not aware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (Rom 6:3). At the same time, we who have been baptized cannot pass lightly over the stark reminder from First Corinthians that the cross remains utter absurdity and folly, or as Leonardo Boff put it, “The cross always crucifies” (Boff, 104).

To preach a word of hope in the midst of suffering is possible only in the power of the Spirit since God alone has the power to bring life out of death. Where did the first preachers of the Gospel discover “Good News” beyond the death of Jesus and in the face of God's silence in that tragedy? How were their own experiences of entering into the passion and death of Jesus—or facing their failure to do that—converted into the passion to preach the Good News of the risen one? The transformation of the apostle Peter and the one known later in the tradition as “the apostle to the apostles,” Mary Magdalene, are described in the Gospels as very different stories, but both can give us clues to the mysterious ways in which the Spirit enkindles a fire in and through the unique life and personality of every preacher, including the suffering that is part of that life.

Passion was not the issue for Peter; fidelity was. In all four Gospels he is remembered as bold in his protests of “unshakeable faith” and loyalty, but utterly weak when put to the test. But the story of this preacher’s formation by the Spirit does not end there. He remains equally passionate in his grief, weeping bitterly in facing his own sin. In the language of Ruby Turpin in Flannery O’Connor’s “Revelation,” Peter learned from his own painful experience of betrayal and God’s unconditional forgiveness that he was both “a wart-hog from
hell” and saved. (O’Connor 1989, 506). This is the man who is commissioned by Jesus in John’s Gospel to “feed my sheep” and who has come down in Catholic tradition as a founding “rock” of the Church. But like Ruby Turpin, even his virtues had to be “burnt away” before he could join the rest of the “lunatics and freaks” who are welcome on the way of salvation.

The other primary witness to the resurrection, Mary Magdalene, had quite a different story of conversion. Her fidelity at the foot of the cross and her role as witness to the resurrection are clear in all four Gospels. As pictured in John’s Gospel, her transformative Easter experience is not one of forgiveness for betrayal, but rather of the challenge to hope again in the midst of grief, the call to believe that the Spirit of God who raises the dead to life can do the impossible. Her call to conversion included the commission to proclaim the Good News boldly from her experience although women’s testimony was as suspect then as it has remained throughout most of Christian history.

Before either Mary Magdalene or Peter could preach the resurrection with passion and conviction, each was called in a very different way to enter into their own history of suffering and failure. But in the midst of doing that, the Spirit empowered each of them to discover God’s vision of who they were and of who they were called to become. Experiences of suffering that lead to conversion can give us compassionate hearts and open our ears to hear “the cries of the poor” including the moans of endangered creatures and our impoverished earth.

With our ears open for an echo of the Gospel coming from “the cries of the poor,” preachers may discover another form of passion for preaching in sharing the tears of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem or the fury which God the mother bares when her young have been threatened or violated (Hos 13:8). God’s own passion for justice is at the heart of the anger that is a share in “God’s wrath” when human dignity is destroyed, when relationships are betrayed, or when creation is ravaged. Because it has long been considered one of the seven capital sins, we often forget that there can be a grace of anger as well. Describing the “power of anger in the work of love,” feminist ethicist Beverly Harrison has remarked:

Anger is not the opposite of love. It is better understood as a feeling-signal that all is not well in our relation to other persons or groups or to the world around us. Anger is a mode of connectedness to others and it is always a vivid form of

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Experiences of suffering that lead to conversion can give us compassionate hearts.
Anger is a signal that change is called for, that transformation in relation is required (Harrison, 49).

Preachers perhaps should take lessons from our ancestors in prayer, the psalmists, who knew well that anger as “a mode of connectedness” extends at times even to our relationship with God. If preachers are to speak in the name of the community in times of genuine crisis and in the face of the experience of God’s absence and apparent lack of fidelity, they must also be in touch with, and able to express, the community’s complaints against God.

One of the most powerful homilies I ever heard at a wake was a single sentence by young woman who stood with her mother and sisters and brothers before her father’s casket and said: “We have God’s promise that death is not the end. We are here to hold God to that promise.” The genre of lament and the tradition of arguing with God, both firmly established in the Jewish tradition of prayer, have everything to do with holding God to the promises of the covenant. But lament goes further in incorporating into prayer accusation or complaint against God in protest, anger, or anguish, precisely because the present situation seems incompatible with the covenant. Boldness before God that “cries out to heaven” for a response is rooted in an understanding of the covenant as a relationship binding on both divine and human partners.

The psalms of lament reflect the psalmist’s experience of profound disorientation in terms not only of external “attacks on every side” from war to disease to false accusations, but also the often more painful internal enemies (“my spirit languishes within me . . . I find no one who knows me; I have no place to flee to, and no one cares for me” (Ps 142). Worst of all for the believer is the silence and even absence of God reflected in the haunting refrain from Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” While the majority of psalms of lament end with a confession of trust, some are more stark, never reaching a point of resolution or even explicit hope, such as Psalm 88 which ends with these verses:

Why, Lord, do you reject me:
why hide from me your face?
I am afflicted and in agony from my youth;
I am dazed with the burden of your dread.
Your furies have swept over me;
your terrors have cut me off.
They encompass me like water all the day;
on all sides they close in on me.
Companion and neighbor you have taken away from me;
my only friend is darkness (Psalm 88:14-18).

Yet even here, the psalmist has not yet broken off relationship. The anger against God that results when hopes have been disappointed or betrayed can remain a
form of connectedness, a form of hope in the possibility of renewed relationship which may not be possible at present.

At times the passion of the preacher comes from such a share in the anguish of the world that it becomes a share in Jesus' own passion. It is not possible to know the inner experience of Jesus with certitude. But those who take seriously the full humanity of Jesus can begin to imagine the stark reality behind the gospel portrait of Jesus' anguish in the garden of Gethsemane or his cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The one who preached absolute trust in the reign of a compassionate God was left in darkness to face rejection of his mission and the utter silence of Abba. Jesus knew the experience that many describe as nothing short of abandonment by God.

On the one hand, in connecting Scripture, liturgy, and human life, preachers must confront the genuine stumbling block: the cross of Jesus, like all human suffering, raises profound questions about God and God's fidelity. On the other hand, it is precisely the language and symbol of the cross that enables preachers to identify the religious depths of all human suffering, to connect our grief and our God in ways that are beyond comprehension or words. Without condoning or glorifying suffering, one of the tasks of the preacher is to hold open the hope that there is no experience of human anguish that is beyond the absolute presence of God.

The challenge of preaching the wisdom of the cross requires us to hold on to the conviction that at the farthest edges of darkness we fall into the hands of the living God, while at the same time rejecting any religious legitimation of human suffering as God's will. In an age of massive and senseless suffering including two world wars and the Holocaust, Edward Schillebeeckx, among others, has underscored the scandal of the cross. He has gone so far as to suggest that in one sense we are saved in spite of the cross of Jesus, rather than because of it. Nevertheless, Schillebeeckx concludes that in the end Jesus faced the cross as the final consequence of fidelity to his preaching mission with a radical hope in the compassionate God he knew as Abba. He filled an experience that was in itself meaningless and absurd with meaning, love, and solidarity with all the innocent who suffer (Schillebeeckx, 729–30).

What Christians celebrate is not the cross, nor the sufferings of Jesus, but the power of a love that is faithful even unto death. Preaching about atonement and redemption or whatever the metaphor for salvation is preaching about God's
unlimited mercy and forgiveness, not about a God who tests us in ways we just
cannot understand, much less about a vengeful God who exacts a blood ransom
as the price to be paid for human sinfulness.

The triumph of the cross is that in Jesus, God's love and fidelity has taken on
the evil and suffering of this world and broken their hold once and for all with
the stronger power of love. The same Spirit of God who is the bond of divine
love is the “strong, driving wind” that not only empowered, but also impelled, the
first preachers of the gospel. But we miss the essential dynamic of preaching if
we focus only on the passion of the preacher.

Passionate Hearing:
The Spirit’s Power in the Community

While the images of the Pentecost narrative in the Acts of the Apostles focus
on the “tongues of fire” that fall on the preachers, it is quite clear that the
“strong, driving wind” of the Spirit is active throughout the community assem-
bling the many diverse members into one body and opening their hearts and
minds to hear and respond to a challenging message. If we focus too much on
the passion of the preacher we risk the danger of reinforcing an understanding
of preaching as “what the preacher does” rather than what the Spirit of God
makes possible when the community of faith listens to the proclamation of the
Word of God with open hearts and spirits searching for “a word that promises
grace.” Not only preachers, but also all the rest of the hearers of the Word, are
anointed at baptism into the priestly, royal, and prophetic mission of Christ and
charged to “announce the Good News of Jesus Christ to all people everywhere”
(Easter, Preface 1, Consecratory Prayer over Chrism; Blessing of Water, Form C).
This is not to deny that in a real way God’s passion for life is mediated and en-
fleshed by the preacher who is called to embody and express that “word of life”
in spite of the limitations and fragility we “earthen vessels” all share. Rather it is
to emphasize that God’s word will not return void, that God’s Spirit is infinitely
creative, and that while a charism for public proclamation of the gospel is a gift
given to some members of the one body for the benefit of all, the desire and gift
for hearing the word of God is given to all the baptized.

If we believe this, then one of the roles not only of bishops and presbyters, but
of anyone entrusted with a charism to preach, is to search for ways to enable all
the baptized not only to hear, but also to speak, the “word of grace” entrusted to
them. It also means that some kind of response to the preaching is important not
only because communication theorists tell us that “what is communicated is
what is heard” but also because the Holy Spirit does not stop speaking when the
preacher does.
At times, of course, there will be resistance from the community to the radical challenge of the Gospel. As Oscar Romero reminded us:

A church that doesn’t provoke any crisis, a gospel that doesn’t unsettle, a word of God that doesn’t get under anyone’s skin, a word of God that doesn’t touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed, what gospel is that? . . . Those preachers who avoid every thorny matter so as not to be harassed, so as not to have conflicts and difficulties, do not light up the world they live in (Romero, 54).

But there can also be a negative response or even a “vacant” response that is a sign that the word entrusted to the Church has not yet been heard. When difficult texts are ignored, when biases from the cultures in which the Gospels originated are named as “word of God,” or when texts are preached in a way that does not capture the authentic freedom of the gospel, the Spirit of God can and does empower resistance and an “alternate hearing” within the community of faith. The baptized are not passive recipients of whatever message is proclaimed. Rather, even when preaching is prophetic and profound, the preaching event is not meant to end with the words of the preacher. Rather those words are meant to serve the community by leading all the baptized into deeper reflection on, and participation in, the mystery of life and death into which we have been baptized.

The Spirit’s gift of the kind of grace that deepens perception is offered to the hearers of the word as well as to preachers. Perhaps as the entire assembly of faith attends more carefully to the action of the Spirit among us, we will see that Annie Dillard’s remarks about Christian worship apply to the preaching event as well:

Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does not one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church: we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return (Dillard 1982, 40–41).
References


