

New Angle or Old Method?

by
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“The text is a gem with many facets,” proclaimed the homiletic professor. “Hold it to the light and find a facet that attracts your attention.”

The advice puzzled me.

“I’m talking about angles,” he continued. “Old stories need new angles.”

I didn’t argue. The concept seemed sound but the methodology was lacking. Just how does a preacher “find a new angle,” anyway?

Plato once visited the poets and inquired about the source of their inspiration. The poets had no words to describe the working of creativity. Plato left in a huff.

So, how *does* a preacher find a new angle on an old story?

Answer: Let the angle find the preacher.

The Text as Lens

Reader-Response literary criticism maintains that meaning arises from the interaction between a text and a reader. For the preacher, this means that “a new angle” arrives when text and context merge. Lived experience in the life of a parish determines the point of entry into the text.

A recent homily on the Nativity of John the Baptist illustrates the process. First, the passage displays its array of dramatic moments: Zechariah’s doubt, the hour of incense, the command of the angel, the conferral of the name, the neighbors marvel, the child destined for a life in the desert, etc.

In the course of a week, chance encounters merge with the reading to yield a unique perspective of the experience embedded in the text:

*There’d come a day
when the boy would elbow his way
from the confines of the priestly home.
Barefoot and stubborn, he’d climb the stony ridge
and stand atop chiseled rock
and yell at the top of his voice,
“Confess!” “Repent!”
Wings of locust wings glinting like spit in his beard.*

*With such a task awaiting him,
how hard did that baby cry?*

*A man loses his only brother.
He slams his fist into wall one night...*

How hard did the prophet cry?

A portrait of a woman in uniform

*sits atop the TV.
The father turns on the news.
The flickering image details yet another bombed-out street.*

How deep does a prophet weep?

*A college student
on spring break in Cancun
boards the wrong bus back to the resort.
A mother shoves a starving child
into the muscled chest and bronzed arms
of the marketing major from the United States.*

*How hard does that baby cry?
How loud does the prophet wail?*

Incubation

The examples cited in this homiletic excerpt were extrapolated from conversations with parishioners regarding sorrow (the brother's grief), trepidation (the parent of a soldier) and economic disparity (the college student in Mexico). The conversations left traces in my memory. When taken into the silence of prayer, the scriptural overlay focused my attention—as through a lens—on the pierce cry of the newborn prophet.

St. Augustine, borrowing upon Cicero's rhetorical method, called this phase *incubatio* and placed it at the beginning of the preparation process. He's no better than Plato's poets in describing the source of creativity, but at least he locates the place where it often occurs.

Creative preachers know the value of meditation and honor its incubative powers.