

## Preaching in Three Dimensions

By

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God's Word offers space to explore, not lessons to bore. A three-dimension approach to the biblical text helps preachers turn flat deliveries into OminiMax presentations.

Open to the Christmas story. A draft blows through a crack in the door; a lantern flickers. A seasoned homilist turns a collar to the wind and gazes in on the sacred scene in awe and wonder.

Open to the Passion. The text shoves the reader out on the street, there to find a man heaving beneath the weight of a wooden beam. The preacher stares at the swollen face, the crown of thorns, the blood-matted hair.

The liturgical homily is *a verbal sacrament*; an experience, not a lecture. It exists to invite the faithful to encounter the Word-made-Flesh. Such an encounter requires a place in which to unfold. How does a preacher approach a text from this experiential, imaginative angle? Stepping through the door and into the scene itself is a good first step. Once inside the scene, one door leads to another, yet the preaching takes along scenes from the world of today. Soon a blending of two worlds occurs: the biblical world of lepers, shepherds and kings with the modern world of politicians, child abusers and office workers.

The disconcerting-comforting-confusing-enlightening result readies the homilist to preach the passage from numerous "corners of the room." Enlivened with the hard edges of physical space, the homily can prod listeners to *experience* the text, not just hear it; to sense the tight squeeze of the Narrow Gate, for instance, or feel the burn of muscle beneath the downward push of a hand-hewn Cross.

### **No Guts, No Story**

Once the landscape of the passage is surveyed and the homilist gets a sense of the place in which the scene unfolds, corresponding places and situations come to mind. In the above referenced passage, for instance, the phrase, "Strive to enter through the narrow gate," led this preacher to a distinct location: a house trailer where the owner of a construction company kicks in the door and rushes down a narrow hall to a room where his foreman, a young man with chronic depression, lies curled in the corner of a cluttered bedroom.

The owner is a friend of mine and the scene brings me back to a conversation we once had regarding that particular worker.

"Why do you keep that fellow on your payroll?" I asked. Joe's quick response set me back.

"Mike's the best foreman I ever had." He looked me hard in the eye. "I'll carry him. I don't care how far. Don't matter how long. I'll carry him."

Joe knows the squeeze of narrow doors because he's gotten good at kicking them down...and lifting his brother up.

The tight dimensions of the biblical text about the narrow door, combined with an action-packed example, leads the listener to experience something of the squeeze of a

passage, its width the shoulder-span of a man named Jesus, its lintel the height of the cross pressed on his back.

### **No Fear, No Faith**

Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, “Works of art are always products of having been in danger, of having gone to the very end of an experience....”

In a similar fashion, salvation unfolds in places of danger: atop mountains called Horeb, Tabor and Calvary. More often than not, these remote heights were accessed by desert routes through hostile towns.

In like manner, the preacher, called to explore the heights and depth of faith, must be prepared to chart rugged terrain.

### **Illustration of a “Three-Dimensional” Homily**

#### Christmas Homily - 2014

A while back, I went to Northwest Hospital to visit a baby in the neo-natal intensive care unit.

Well, the nurse at the station directed me to the wrong room.

When I walked into Room 24, the one she directed me to, I discovered I was not the room of the parishioner I was there to visit.

Instead, I found myself in a room with three strangers:

a young mother

a young father

and a very small baby who was struggling to breathe.

So I said, “Excuse me, I’m in the wrong room.”

The mother looked at me,  
then she glanced at the father.

He looked up and, for a moment, we stared at each other.  
He held me in his eyes...and I could not read his eyes.

The mother, she is a teenager, okay?

Too young to be married.  
She's sitting in a chair next to the bed,  
the baby on her lap.

The father, also a teenager, is sitting next to her.  
He's skinny.  
Tattoos on his arms.  
Rings in his nose.  
And probably no job.

And I'm thinking, what a loser!  
(Yep, that's what I'm thinking.)

Then the guy said something I didn't expect.  
He said, "Father, we could use some prayers."

*And that's when it happened! When I knelt on the floor to give the baby my blessing.  
I looked at all those plastic tubes...  
And suddenly, I found myself in Bethlehem,  
in the presence of another young couple  
who didn't have much a place in this world.*

And beneath the murmur of medical equipment  
I heard an echo of angels singing Glory to God...  
Glory to God in the Highest.

***I have come to proclaim liberty to captives, says the Lord.  
To bring good news to the poor  
and announce a year of favor from our God.***

Today, dear friends, these words are fulfilled in our hearing!