

The Preacher as Wilderness Guide

by
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“If you’re not living on the edge, you’re taking up space.”

In one sentence, the college-age daughter of a friend of mine described a bracing attitude toward life, a feral attitude seldom sighted on the carpeted terrain of a modern church and virtually extinct in the region of the ambo.

Life on the edge. Let the dead bury the dead. Do-or-die discipleship. Sell-what-you-have or get left behind.

When was the last time you heard the gospel preached with vigor?

“Nice homily, Father.”

“Thank you, George.”

The parishioner steps away and I think to myself, “Missed the mark again.”

Nice homily. But *nice* lives a safe distance from the edge.

Bible folk, on the other hand, thrive on the edge. When necessary, they pull up stakes and load up faith in backpacks and panniers. Naomi and Ruth trek the badlands of Moab. David forages for food in the forests of Engeddi. John wears camel hide to protect his skin from the burning eye of God.

The Word of God passed from mountaineers to outfitters to trappers (Moses, Joseph, and Simon the Tanner to name a few). Yet preachers today overlook the function of wilderness guide. Many—at least in liturgical churches—speak in hushed tones and polite discourse. They’ve forgotten to scout the trail for peril, guide hikers across the rocky scree then urge them jump the chasm of death.

The church requires wilderness guides because life on the edge demands belief.

Frontier Language

Preaching can be biblical, doctrinal, liturgical, catechetical or evangelistic. Its content varies according to style and occasion. Yet a persistent misunderstanding of preaching’s basic purpose remains. Preaching exists not to inform listeners but to *move* them.


This means that precise categories and definitions—though necessary in theological classrooms—pollutes the streams of that wild country where adventure and commitment roam.

In “The Word of God in Words,” Bernard Brandon Scott distinguishes the language of the settlement from the language of the frontier. The former functions well in family, classroom and workplace environments where life is predictable, rules are followed and clarity a paramount value.

Frontier language, on the other hand, kicks in when we enter the region of the soul, that unmarked landscape fraught with fear yet full of hope.

Frontier language transports us to places that we’ve never been. It’s words light the night like sparks from a fire, warm the hands like coffee in a cup or spike the spirit like the sting of whiskey.

Head for the Border



David Buttrick urges preachers to shine a light into “the unlit areas” of life, those places where listeners hesitate to travel alone.¹ Preachers who’ve camped in Moses’ tent know that curtains drawn around ER beds comprise the “meeting tent” where some listener might encounter God next week. Homilists who’ve tasted dust on the road know the look of those who’ve lost their way to Emmaus.

Whether the goal of the homily is a call to deeper faith, fuller understanding of God or more consistent Gospel living, it’s the preacher who dares to hike life’s frontiers that gains the hearing.

If the preacher avoids tension, for instance, the Passion of Christ is never preached. If the preacher fears the heights of ecstasy, the vision of heaven never unfolds. If the preacher’s feet never get sore, miracles get overlooked. If the belly doesn’t grumble, the multitudes starve. If the preacher shuns debate, Paul’s letters remain tucked at the bottom of the backpack.

Believers are sojourners, preachers the scouts.

Explore, Don’t Explain

Professional outfitters know the trails to breathtaking vistas as well as avalanche chutes and other hazards along the way. Such a guide wastes neither time nor words. You listen. You learn. You stand in awe at the power of God.

In a similar way, effective preachers don’t waste words on non-essentials. Sharp words catch their attention.

“Drop the sword, Peter” marks the trailhead to street gangs and the response required of today’s disciple.

“My God, why have you forsaken me?” leads straight to the camp of despondency and grief.

“Sell what you have” marks the way to retirement plans, portfolios and the steep climb to the heights of trust.

In the hands of an experienced guide, the words “Mary, do not be afraid” rumble like thunder in the heart of a mother (see sidebar example).

The notion of preacher-as-outfitter compels homilists and listeners to uncover the ways the sharp edges of ancient texts cut their way into modern life. In this approach to preaching, homilists lead listeners to into the urgent aspects of the text where, together, they explore the twists, the turns and the wonders of life before the face of God.

This means didactic lectures get replaced with dramatic descriptions, conventional wisdom is scuttled. Lessons on polite living give way to ponderings of the mighty power of the Spirit.

No Fear

Listeners have no choice but to follow the trails blazed by their preachers. When homilists lack ministerial courage, their preaching turns predictable.

But when preachers approach their task as a matter of life and death, the Spirit of Christ grabs hold, hearts thrill, lives transform and souls get saved.

¹ David Buttrick, *Homiletic Moves and Structures*. Fortress Press, 1988, p. 35.