

## Context, Craft, and Kerygma: Two Thousand Years of Great Sermons

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*Many people are generous in their praise and gratitude for a good sermon. But as many a deacon, priest, or bishop will agree, one of the clearest signs of a sermon that has affected someone deeply is when that sermon is remembered. The words "I've been thinking about that sermon you preached last month on . . .", or something similar, are therefore even more welcome than "thank you for that great sermon today!" This article considers sermons that meet this criterion: most have been remembered for centuries. They are clear, striking, and thoughtful, in many different ways, and they were (as we shall see) relevant in their own eras, yet are still relevant today. In the words of the Book of Common Prayer, every one of these sermons "proclaims the Gospel . . . and [speaks] the truth."*

"Thank you for a *great* sermon!"

We have all had happy occasion to say those words of gratitude from time to time. A great sermon is, after all, a gift and a joy: it adds another dimension to the weekly blessing of word and sacrament, it augments our faith.

Now what exactly do we *mean* when we say a sermon is great? For most of us, outstanding sermons are diverse: some edify, some confirm and strengthen, some challenge or even defy, some exhort and plead, some calmly invite us into quiet meditation, some vigorously rouse us into agapic action.

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But in the midst of all this diversity, there are certain strengths that seem to characterize all truly outstanding sermons. We shall see these strengths in samples from two millennia of excellent sermons. But first, consider these criteria for homilists from two very different segments of the Christian spectrum.

In “How to Spot a Good Sermon,” Tim Cantrell, of Christ Seminary and Christ Baptist Church, Polokwane, South Africa, mentions three requisites: 1. the Word of God [must be] *clearly explained*; 2. the word of God [must be] *directly applied*; 3. *the sermon must use homiletical tools* (such as a good introduction; a memorable thesis/purpose/summary statement; a clear outline; effective illustrations and word pictures; a good conclusion).<sup>1</sup>

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, an Apostolic Exhortation directed in 2013 at both clergy and laity, and considered by many Roman Catholic authorities his paramount proclamation, Pope Francis wrote that the homily “is not a casual discourse, nor a conference or a lesson,” but rather “that dialogue which has already been opened between the Lord and his people, so that it finds fulfillment in life; . . . whoever gives the homily must be conscious that they are not doing their own thing, they are preaching, giving voice to Jesus, preaching the Word of Jesus”; and the homily “is a distinctive genre, since it is preaching situated within the framework of a liturgical celebration; hence it should be brief and avoid taking on the semblance of a speech or a lecture.”<sup>2</sup>

Thus, a Baptist preacher and the Bishop of Rome, who certainly would teach quite different, and sometimes opposed, view of the sacraments, of worship, of the church and its structure and authority, even of creedal doctrine, are in striking agreement about the elements of a fine sermon: (1) it must speak to the real-life concerns of the Christians for whom it is created; (2) it must be well made in order to do this effectively; (3) it must proclaim the good news of the Christ event.

In short, *context*, *craft*, and *kerygma*.

The ten examples that follow are drawn from two millennia of fine preaching, by markedly different preachers in utterly diverse

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Cantrell, “How to Spot a Good Sermon,” Polokwane, South Africa, 2004. Online at <https://www.sats.edu.za/userfiles/How%20to%20Spot%20a%20Good%20Sermon.doc>.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html). Emphasis added.

circumstances and eras. But at the same time, all clearly meet our three classic criteria.

### *Christ's Proclamation*

We begin with the oldest Christian sermon, Luke's Sermon on the Plain.<sup>3</sup> Though the sermon as we have it in the sixth chapter may be an amalgam of Jesus' sayings pieced together by the writer, it certainly must mimic Jesus' sermons, and its opening we can trust as authentic.

20 Then fixing his eyes on his disciples he said:  
How blessed are you who are poor: the kingdom of God is yours.

21 Blessed are you who are hungry now: you shall have your fill.

Blessed are you who are weeping now: you shall laugh.

22 Blessed are you when people hate you, drive you out, abuse you, denounce your name as criminal, on account of the Son of man.

23 Rejoice when that day comes and dance for joy, look!—your reward will be great in heaven. This was the way their ancestors treated the prophets.

24 But alas for you who are rich: you are having your consolation now.

25 Alas for you who have plenty to eat now: you shall go hungry. Alas for you who are laughing now: you shall mourn and weep.

26 Alas for you when everyone speaks well of you! This was the way their ancestors treated the false prophets.

27 But I say this to you who are listening: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.<sup>4</sup>

The *context*, as New Testament scholars are eager to remind us, is Judaism in the first century CE. Jesus' listeners were Jews chafing

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew's version, the Sermon on the Mount, most scholars agree, is more embellished and therefore further from Jesus' original.

<sup>4</sup> New Jerusalem Bible. This fresh translation tends to be the most literal, and lacks the echoes of the too-familiar version of 1611.

under Roman occupation, seeking to discern God's will for them in that straitened situation.

The *craft*—what has made it effective then and now—is parallelism and paradox. That parallel structure (four “Blessed are the”; four contrasting “Alas for you”<sup>5</sup>) make it easy to understand when heard, easy to remember. But its strongest sermon element is *paradox*. This is a Greek term that means an idea contrary to common opinions and current belief, and Jesus’ first words are precisely that: both Jewish tradition and common sense said that the rich person, the well-regarded citizen, the well-nourished, those who laugh, are the blessed, the “happy” people (for the original word means both). Jesus means to challenge that expectation and root out that assumption, and his bold opening drives that home.

The *kerygma* is the good news of the kingdom of God, and God's special concern for the marginal, the suffering. Both common sense and a substantial portion of Hebrew scripture suggests that the healthy, wealthy, secure person has been “blessed”; they certainly seem to enjoy God's favor, or at least dumb good luck. Jesus in no uncertain terms challenges that. Which must have been good news indeed for his hard-pressed and oppressed hearers.

And instead of the chatty, folksy sermon openings we hear so often, the modern preacher might imitate Jesus’ style, and begin her sermon with an abrupt series of challenging blessings.

### *Contrast and Comparison: Gregory of Nyssa on St. Stephen's Day*

Gregory of Nyssa (335–95 CE) was one of the three Cappadocians, with his brother Basil and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus. They were arguably the most influential Christian thinkers in an influential century (along with St. Augustine in the Western church). Gregory combined a brilliant mind with an equally powerful creative imagination to produce Christian writings of all sorts: treatises, letters, scriptural commentaries, and his masterpiece, the *Catechetical Oration*. Unlike Basil and the other Gregory, he was mostly self-taught.

How lovely is the inspiration exhibited by those who are good, and how sweet is the joy they disclose! See, we acquire a feast from a feast and grace from grace. Yesterday the Lord

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<sup>5</sup> Specifically, *anaphora*: compare with “Martin Luther King,” below.

of the universe welcomed us whereas today it is the imitator Stephen of the Lord. How are they related to each other? One assumed human nature on our behalf while the other shed it for his Lord. One accepted the cave of this life for us, and the other left it for him. One was wrapped in swaddling clothes for us, and the other was stoned for him. One destroyed death, and the other scorned it.<sup>6</sup>

The *context* is maturing and expanding church. In Gregory's century, the church went from being an always illegal, sporadically persecuted, marginal cult to the official religion of the great Roman Empire. That mixed blessing brought many advantages and many problems, including the challenge of expressing what exactly Christians believe—and the safety needed to work that out.

Gregory's *craft* is his powerful antitheses, his comparison/contrast of Christ and St. Stephen. And the *kerygma* he proclaims is the Word made flesh and the resurrection.

Stephen's Day is December 26, the day after Christmas, and those who notice it sense the strange follow-up of the warmth of Bethlehem: the cold death by stoning of the first martyr. Gregory by using *antithesis* shows that the saint's day is not merely a crude contrast with the Feast of the Nativity but rather a balanced reversing of its features—Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes, Stephen stoned to death—and at the same time its perfect complement: for Jesus' birth and Stephen's death, seeming opposites, are both acts of supreme self-donation. Jesus gave up his heavenly life for others, just as Stephen gave up his earthly life.

The contemporary preacher might note that Gregory does not simply offer a list of contrasts: beneath the antitheses is that underlying unity. He might try this with any number of topics as the lectionary unrolls: contrast the powerful life of David with the humble career of Jesus, both of which fulfill messiahship; contrast the abundance of All Saints' with the leanness of Advent; the pathos of Passion Sunday with the hope of Good Friday.

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<sup>6</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Two Homilies Concerning Saint Stephen*, [http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04z/z\\_0330-0395\\_\\_Gregorius\\_Nyssenus\\_\\_Two\\_Homilies\\_Concerning\\_Saint\\_Stephen\\_\\_EN.doc.html](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04z/z_0330-0395__Gregorius_Nyssenus__Two_Homilies_Concerning_Saint_Stephen__EN.doc.html).

*Mythic Retelling: Rabanus Maurus*

Rabanus Maurus (780–856) was one of the most talented teachers in the third generation after Charlemagne, who, imitating Caesar Augustus, the imperial prototype, sponsored culture and learning throughout his realms. Rabanus became abbot of the very important Abbey of Fulda in western Germany. Best known for the ordination hymn *Veni creator spiritus*, he was the most prolific writer of his era: his works fill six volumes (around four hundred pages each) of the *Patrologia Latina*, the all-inclusive collection of writings in medieval Latin. He was also, as this startling example shows, an unusually imaginative preacher.

Look, my friends! The day we wait for so long every year has arrived—the Day when the Rescuer hog tied the Prince of Shadows, shattered the doors of Death, set free the souls of the blessed, and rose triumphant in glory from the Deep.

Now on this night, as we have heard in the Gospel lesson, when our Redeemer got up again, “there was a great earthquake, an angel of the Master came down from the skies, came near, and rolled away the stone from the mouth of the tomb, and sat down upon it.” That stone was the one some men from Judah had set there in their nastiness, and then put sentries there to guard it. . . .

That night, the ancient, wandering Protoplasm wandered back to its homeland, Paradise—where Christ had pushed aside that Sentry Cherub. You see, on that night the door of Paradise swung open, for only Christ could have closed it, and only he could open it again.<sup>7</sup>

The *context* is an Easter Vigil sermon for early medieval Christians. The faith was quite new for most of his hearers: they were only a generation or so separated from the religion of Odin and Thor, and some had just themselves experienced conversion. And likewise, only a few generations separated them from nomadic, tribal wandering. Rabanus makes the most of this by portraying the resurrected Christ as the original wanderer: the new Adam who wanders home.

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<sup>7</sup> PL 110, col. 33. Author’s translation.

The *craft* is that narrative. Most Easter sermons nowadays are about the empty tomb, the young man in white, the three women: the residue of the resurrection on Easter morning. Rabanus goes deeper: he retells the story in mythic terms (“mythic” in the deeper classical sense of a narrative that expresses a truth too deep for ordinary language) in order to show how Easter expresses St. Paul’s notion of Christ as the second Adam.

And that is the *kerygma*: “For since by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” That teaching has been until recently de-emphasized in favor of the sacrifice of Christ, but it was very central to the faith of the early Christians, and Rabanus reclaims it for his early medieval hearers.

Such a mythic retelling of any biblical narrative can work wonders for a modern congregation. Familiarity breeds indifference, so to tell the same old story in the same old words runs a very dangerous risk: to leave a congregation indifferent. But to tell that same old story in *fresh* words, as Rabanus does, can show them their own faith in an entirely new light.

### *The Sermon as Poetry: Wulfstan*

Wulfstan’s *Sermon of the Wolf to the English* may be the most famous sermon in medieval English. Wulfstan (ca. 950–1023) called himself “the Wolf,” eventually became Archbishop of York, and was known in his lifetime for his highly charged sermons. The *Wolf to the English* was written as the nation was reeling from decades of attacks by the pagan Vikings and as the year 1000 approached.<sup>8</sup>

Beloved brethren, learn the truth: this world is in haste,  
hurtling towards its end,  
and the longer it lasts, the more gruesome it gets and  
evil upon evil has to happen for the sins of the folk  
before the advent of Antichrist: and so worldwide it will be  
grim and gruesome.

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<sup>8</sup> Some medievalists do not accept this dating, but other sermons and treatises he wrote that I have translated can be definitely dated before the millennial year. I see no reason to believe otherwise for this sermon.

And learn that the Devil has drawn us astray for too long  
 by far,  
 and that fidelity has not flourished among us, just empty  
 words,  
 and misrule has ruled our nation,  
 and few have tried to fix that,  
 and the wicked plot evil against their own kin day by day,  
 and injustice is exalted, and wrong upon wrong winds through  
 this nation.<sup>9</sup>

The *context* is a nation of Christians in grave political and spiritual danger.

The *craft* is the closeness to poetry. This translation attempts to capture a little of the *alliteration* that characterizes the original. The original, in Old English, almost reads like a poem; Old English poetry has a strong, simple, alliterative sound,<sup>10</sup> and Wulfstan exploits it here to great effect: the sermon would have sounded like a drum-beat stressing the theme, that we are sliding down the slippery slope and must repent with urgency. Many modern preachers *quote* poetry, but that is not what Wulfstan does: he assimilates poetry into his own lines to make them strong and striking. This could serve the modern preacher very well, especially when her theme is either repentance or a call to moral action.

The *kerygma* is the gift of hope in the darkness. The good news of a call to repentance is that though the need is urgent, time is running short, evil is accelerating, the end is near, it is late—but it is still not too late. It never is.

### *St. Bernard: Scripture as Web*

Bernard of Clairvaux was the great twelfth-century leader formed by the new Order of the Cistercians, and seized with a conviction of the love of God. Like many of our exemplars, Bernard wrote prodigiously, and was respected by great political figures, pontiffs, and humble monks alike. He made mistakes: he inspired the Second Crusade, whose success was a spiritual and moral failure for Christians.

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<sup>9</sup> Wulfstan, “Sermo Lupi ad Anglos.” Authors’ translation. [http://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/anglica/Chronology/11thC/Wulfstan/wul\\_serm.html](http://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/anglica/Chronology/11thC/Wulfstan/wul_serm.html).

<sup>10</sup> A modern version, by the poet Ezra Pound, suggests the shape: “In the gloom, the gold gathers the light against it” (Ezra Pound, Canto VII).



But his sermons are masterworks, and represent great examples of a very traditional way of preaching.

Just as, in the art of medicine, the patient must be purified, then fed, because the body must first be emptied of debilitating disease, then built back up with healthy food, so our Lord Jesus Christ, the physician of souls, whose liberating force is made clear in his incarnation, offers the medicine of salvation. Before his passion he offered seven purifications; after the resurrection, the same number of wholesome foods. Our friend Elisha ordered Naaman the leper to immerse himself in the Jordan seven times, and that immersion was a *descent*. Likewise we are cleansed and purified by our Lord's *descent*, which was his humble way of life before the Passion, in the resurrection and the life that he offered for forty days we are restored and nourished by that delectable nourishment.<sup>11</sup>

The *context* is an All Saints' Day sermon for literate Christians in a happy era of creativity. The many challenges of the early Middle Ages were now past, and what historians call the propitious, prosperous "High Medieval" had begun (roughly 1000–1300 CE). As in Gregory's fourth century, Bernard's twelfth century gave powerful teachers like Bernard and Hildegard of Bingen the opportunity, and the safety, to reflect and build on the faith.

The *craft* is the deeply traditional interweaving of scripture. Modern Christians almost never hear a sermon like this, but it was the norm for centuries: to match an Old Testament person or event (here, the healing of Naaman) with a New Testament equivalent (here, the seven "leprous" effects of pride, purged by the humility of Christ). Woven throughout are other scriptural threads: the seven gifts of the Spirit (Isaiah 11), the incarnation, Emmaus, the events at the empty tomb and during the forty days before ascension. Most older sermons resemble this one; in fact, it is a comparatively simple sample.

The *kerygma* is the grace of baptism. Naaman's immersions prefigure the sacrament, as anyone would have known. And baptism is

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<sup>11</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, "In Festo Omnium Sanctorum." Author's translation. [http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/02m/1090-1153,\\_Bernardus\\_Claraevallensis\\_Abbas,\\_Sermones\\_De\\_Sanctis.\\_In\\_Festo\\_Omnium\\_Sanctorum,\\_MLT.pdf](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/02m/1090-1153,_Bernardus_Claraevallensis_Abbas,_Sermones_De_Sanctis._In_Festo_Omnium_Sanctorum,_MLT.pdf).

the commonality of the saints. Their witness is diverse, but they all share the second birth of baptism—as do we.

*Prayer Book Style: Cranmer*

Thomas Cranmer was the great leader of the Anglican renovation and the chief architect of the first English prayer books. He was, like the Continental reformers, determined literally to “re-form” the church, that is, to restore lost forms and theology; but in contrast to them, the Anglicans were not so much anxious to discard fourteenth-century corruptions as eager to reclaim the parameters and the dynamics of the earlier church—a process that has continued in Anglican reform to this day.

To know how we obtain our justification, it is expedient to consider, first, how naughty<sup>12</sup> and sinful we are all, that be of Adam’s kindred; and contrariwise, what mercifulness is in God, which to all faithful and penitent sinners pardoneth all their offences for Christ’s sake. Of these two things no man is lightly ignorant that ever hath heard of the fall of Adam, which was to the infection of all his posterity; and again, of the inexplicable mercy of our heavenly Father, which sent his only begotten Son to suffer his most grievous passion for us, and shed his most precious blood, the price of our redemption. But it is greatly to be wished and desired, that as all Christian men do know the same, so that every man might acknowledge and undoubtedly believe the same to be true and verified, even upon himself; so that both he may humble himself to God and knowledge himself a miserable sinner not worthy to be called his son; and yet surely trust, that to him being repentant God’s mercy is ready to forgive. And he that seeth not these two things verified in himself, can take no manner of emolument and profit by acknowledging and believing these things to be verified in others. But we cannot satisfy our minds or settle our conscience that these things

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<sup>12</sup> “Good for nothing,” not, as in modern use, “mischievous.”

are true, saying that we do evidently see that God's word so teacheth us.<sup>13</sup>

Here the *context* is a Lenten sermon for Christians newly worshipping in their everyday language. As historians often note, one Sunday English people heard the mass in Latin; the following Sunday, they worshiped in English.

The *craft* lies in matching sermon to prayer book. Cranmer seizes the opportunity: in its vocabulary, its rhythms and cadence, and in its theology, this segment of a sermon echoes the first English prayer books. Why? Because both—despite the fact that their style seems remote and lofty to the twenty-first century ear—were in the sixteenth century the way an intelligent person spoke English. Any true, and any truly great, sermon, moreover, is a response to the word of the Lord—a part of the liturgy, not a break from it—and the whole liturgy should amount to a unity, not a crazy quilt patchwork of odds and ends.

The *kerygma* is the proportions of Christ's sacrifice: our "miserable sinfulness" overbalanced by God's "inexplicable mercy."

The twenty-first century homilist can emulate Cranmer by a sensitivity to the word choice and rhythms of the current (and similarly new) Book of Common Prayer (which, contrary to popular opinion, most definitely has its own, contemporary, diction and style) and also by quoting its prayers within his sermon.

### *Practical Analogy: John Henry Newman*

John Henry Newman began as a Broad Church evangelical, then shifted to the great nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholic Oxford Movement, and finally converted to Roman Catholicism. His *Apologia pro Vita Sua* is his explanation for this life trajectory, and a great work of English prose; his *Grammar of Assent* is his theological *magnum*, and its dynamic concept of faith as a way of knowing reality anticipates much later Christian theology.

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Cranmer, "Necessary Doctrine," <http://www.sermonindex.net/modules/articles/index.php?view=article&aid=4230>.

There are serious men who are in the habit of describing Christian Faith as a feeling or a principle such as ordinary persons cannot enter into; a something strange and peculiar in its very nature, different in kind from every thing that affects and influences us in matters of this world. . . . But it is not at all true that Faith itself, i.e. Trust, is a strange principle . . . and to say that it is irrational is even an absurdity. I mean such a Faith as that of Abraham, mentioned in the text, which led him to believe God's word when opposed to his own experience.

To hear some men speak (I mean men who scoff at religion), it might be thought we never acted on Faith or Trust, except in religious matters; whereas we are acting on trust every hour of our lives. . . . Let us take some examples.

It is obvious that we trust to our memory. We do not now witness what we saw yesterday; yet we have no doubt it took place in the way we remember. . . . Again, even when we use reasoning, and are convinced of any thing by reasoning, what is it but that we trust the general soundness of our reasoning powers. . . . Who of us would doubt, on seeing strong shadows on the ground, that the sun was shining out, though our face happened to be turned the other way?<sup>14</sup>

Newman's *context* is an era of rampant secularization. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment, the failed French Revolution and the successful American, the rapid advance in machine technology, and the continuing political turmoil challenged traditional faith profoundly, and triggered our era of secularism. One of its themes has always been the notion that Christianity is blind faith and unreason; Newman's thoughtful sermon rebuts this flimsy notion.

His *craft* is the art of analogy. An *analogy* is an extended comparison, and Cardinal Newman is masterful in using it. For three reasons: he was immensely learned and obviously brilliant, but he also had (like C. S. Lewis) the gift of making his brilliant thinking understandable and even enjoyable. That he does here, by making the analogy between Christian faith and the everyday trusts we hardly notice: we

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<sup>14</sup> "Religious Faith Rational," in John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/parochial/volume1/sermon15.html>.

trust our memories, we trust our ability to think, we trust the testimony of others. And he does it in such a gently humorous way that we join him in chuckling at religious skeptics who think they are smart. But the argument is very strong: Aristotle, whom Newman knew well, said that the more points of comparison analogy makes, the stronger the argument. Newman supplies comparison after comparison here.

And the *kerygma* is the naturalness of trust. Trust in the witness of another is, as the Thomist scholar Josef Pieper has noted, is the essence of faith. Newman shows that such trust is not irrational but natural: we do it all the time. Christianity goes beyond reason, but it does not reject it.

*Anaphora: Martin Luther King Jr.*

Dr. King, the most powerful Christian leader of the twentieth-century civil rights movement, activist, author, scholar, and advocate for nonviolent protest, was often celebrated in the media as a biblical-sounding speaker with a prophetic voice. He was indeed exactly that, as this brief passage clearly shows.

We need not stop with the glaring examples of the Bible to establish the reality of evil; we need only to look out into the wide arena of everyday life.

*We have seen evil* in tragic lust and inordinate selfishness.

*We have seen it* in high places where men are willing to sacrifice truth on the altars of their self-interest.

*We have seen it* in imperialistic nations trampling over other nations with the iron feet of oppression.

*We have seen it* clothed in the garments of calamitous wars which left battlefields painted with blood, filled nations with widows and orphans, and sent men home physically handicapped and psychologically wrecked.

*We have seen evil* in all of its tragic dimensions.<sup>15</sup>

Dr. King's *context* is a nation painfully discovering its moral failure. The Emancipation Proclamation made slavery illegal, but it could not possibly eradicate the underlying evil that had enabled it. And the

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<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., "The Death of Evil upon the Seashore," May 17, 1956, [http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document\\_images/Vol03Scans/256\\_17-May-1956\\_The%20Death%20of%20Evil%20upon%20the%20Seashore.pdf](http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/Vol03Scans/256_17-May-1956_The%20Death%20of%20Evil%20upon%20the%20Seashore.pdf).

optimism and prosperity of postwar America made it easy to practice denial.

The *craft* is the biblical art of *anaphora*, which is the repetition of words at the beginning of successive sentences. He clearly learned it from scripture, especially the Old Testament, where the sound of words is paramount, even in translation. The Psalms and the Prophets abound in this; for example, consider this extended passage from Lamentations:

He has wasted my flesh and skin away, has broken my bones.  
 He has besieged me and made hardship a circlet round my head.  
 He has forced me to dwell where all is dark, like those long-dead in their everlasting home.  
 He has walled me in so that I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains;  
 even when I shout for help, he shuts out my prayer.  
 He has closed my way with blocks of stone, he has obstructed my paths.  
 For me he is a lurking bear, a lion in hiding.  
 Heading me off, he has torn me apart, leaving me shattered.  
 He has bent his bow and used me as a target for his arrows.  
 He has shot deep into me with shafts from his quiver.  
 I have become a joke to all my own people, their refrain all day long.  
 He has given me my fill of bitterness, he has made me drunk with wormwood.  
 He has broken my teeth with gravel, he has fed me on ashes.  
 I have been deprived of peace, I have forgotten what happiness is  
 and thought, "My lasting hope in Yahweh is lost."

(Lam. 3:4–18, NJB)

This is what they are hearing when people say Dr. King's speeches were biblical. They were, not because he quoted scripture, but

because he had assimilated it. The lesson for the modern preacher is obvious: don't just quote the Bible, assimilate it, and use its persuasive beauties.

His *kerygma* is the healing power of confession. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us, promises the Fourth Gospel, but we have to recognize the sins first.

*A Striking Beginning: Susan E. Hill*

Susan Hill is priest associate at the Church of the Holy Apostles, New York City.

I'd really like to preach this morning about the gospel, that passage from Matthew that we just heard, about Jesus' teaching about being welcoming to others. I'd tell you about the different welcoming styles of my two grandmothers, and end with some provocative questions about how we as individuals and as a congregation can think more fully about being welcoming.

That's what I want to preach about this morning—doesn't that sound nice? I think we'd all enjoy it very much.

But . . . there's the matter of that first reading, from Genesis. It's a familiar enough story, but likely one that you'd rather not spend much time on, because, frankly, it's pretty upsetting. How do we understand a story where God tells Abraham to go up a mountain and sacrifice his beloved son? Is it a story about faith and obedience? Or maybe about a misguided Abraham, or even an abusive God?

Is it all just a test of faithfulness gone horribly awry?<sup>16</sup>

The *context* here is a contemporary urban American congregation trying faithfully to navigate a postmodern world. The polarization, mass murders of children, erratic economy, controversial leadership, tribalism, rampant technologies, colossal fortunes and unprecedented poverty that characterize that world suggest two paths for the homilist: some very real Christian comfort, or some very difficult reflection on faith problems. Susan bravely has chosen that less-traveled road.

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<sup>16</sup> The rest of the sermon can be found at <http://www.holyapostlesnyc.org/?s=susan+hill>.

Her *craft* here is the artful opening that mentions both options. There is a very clever strategy used by lawyers—Cicero used it in the first century, and they still use it today—called *apophasis*, mentioning something you have just said you will not mention. Susan Hill uses this device as she opens her sermon: “I’d really like to preach,” then briefly sketches the kind, gentle, “nice,” and safe sermon on welcoming she could have offered. Then she states her real theme, and closes the opening with rhetorical questions: How do we understand it? Is this about faith and obedience? A misguided Abraham? An abusive God? A trial “gone awry”? All refer to the approaches thoughtful readers have indeed considered. She has done three things here: let us in on a preacher’s experience of the road less traveled, stated the enormous difficulty raised by the reading, and opened possible (but ultimately also rejected) ways of approach.

The *kerygma* here is the tensile strength of Christian paradox. She addresses one of the most challenging subjects in Christianity, which is called *theodicy*, through one of the most challenging stories in the Bible, the aborted sacrifice of Isaac. How could a decent God ask for such a thing? In other words, how can a loving God permit the vastness—and the unfair distribution—of suffering? The Christian philosopher Kierkegaard, brooding and brilliant, used precisely this story to frame his deepest meditation, *Fear and Trembling*. To tackle this in a sermon is an act of courage; to do this in such a way as to make us listeners take the challenge as well is the kind of thing that makes sermons great.

### *And a Peaceful End: Basil the Great*

Basil (329–79 CE) was one of the three Cappadocians (see Nysa’s sermon above). They reinforced the Nicene Creed (325) and helped prepare the way for its extended version (381). Basil also was a dominant bishop (of Caesarea) and the author of the most important monastic *Rule* in the Eastern church. And yet of all the splendid preachers we have considered here, he was the most relaxed, the most colloquial, and the most gifted at bringing his words into his present context, as will be evident in this excerpt from a series of meditative homilies for some group of brothers or sisters.

But now, while I have been offering these reflections on the first evenings of creation, this evening’s shadows fall, and cut me off. May the Father of the true light, who illuminates the



beautiful heavens with that light, who lightens our darkness with the light of fire, and who prepares for our life in eternity an eternal spiritual light, now lighten your hearts with the recognition of the truth, guard you against the random injuries of life, letting you walk in the beauty of the daylight, like the sun, in the brilliance of the Saints, and I shall extol you until the day of Christ, to whom be glory and power to the ages of ages, Amen.<sup>17</sup>

The end of a speech, said Aristotle, should do the following: leave the listener on friendly terms; amplify the theme; move the listener emotionally; recapitulate (not summarize). Basil does all this: his conclusion here is especially suave. He reminds his friends of his theme by connecting it with their own context (the sun is setting and he has been talking about the first sunset of the world), and he points ahead, expanding his theme, to the end of days. The context is a retreat. The craft is gentle self-reference, what is called “breaking the fourth wall” in theater. The kerygma is the light in the darkness.

The sermons we have explored are indeed diverse: some startling and urgent, some quiet and thoughtful; some reassuring, some chastening; some visionary, some pragmatic. And they all fulfill our criteria: they speak the truth to their time, place, and people; they speak it with art and power; and they speak the Christian faith. Yet they are also somehow timelessly relevant; they continue to speak to us, any of us, in our postmodern era and in our various Christian lives. Because the challenges and problems Christians have faced down through the centuries are somehow also timeless: we overhear sermons because the initial hearers are our sisters and brothers, the initial preachers our mothers and fathers.

And, of course, the *kerygma*—the good news—is timeless. Always good, always new.

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<sup>17</sup> “Homily 2 In Hexaemeron,” PG 29, col. 51. Author’s translation. See <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3201.htm> for different translations of Basil’s sermons on the seven days of creation.