

Symposium:
Barbara Brown Taylor

The Use of Scripture in the Sermons of Barbara Brown Taylor

THOMAS G. LONG*

In recent years, Barbara Brown Taylor has justifiably been celebrated as a memoirist, essayist, and thoughtful writer and speaker on the spiritual life. But she first entered the public view as a remarkable preacher. Even though her published writing has tilted lately toward non-sermonic material, she is still recognized as one of America's most gifted preachers, and her sermons are widely studied by students and pastors alike as literary and homiletical gems.

However, as Taylor herself describes her literary development, the preaching track of her life has been something of an unexpected detour. In an interview with the North Georgia ecological journal *Flycatcher*, she tells the interviewer that she set out early on to be a writer of short stories and poems, only to be greeted, as many young writers are, with a flurry of rejection slips. She goes on to say:

To make a very long story short, I took a part time job in a church after seminary, was invited to preach my first sermon at some small service during Holy Week, and afterwards someone came up to me and asked for a copy of that sermon. It wasn't until I was driving home that I realized I had just "sold" my first short story. Someone wanted to read what I had written! Either that, or they couldn't understand a word I had said and wanted to find out if it made any more sense on paper. So that was it. The train left the station and I spent the next twenty years writing in and for the church. I found

* Thomas G. Long is Bandy Professor Emeritus of Preaching, and Director of the Early Career Pastoral Leader Program, Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, Georgia. He is the author of many books, most recently, *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

my audience. I found a way to use language that seemed to work for some people and it is only now—nearer the end of my life than the beginning—that I'm turning back to creative writing again.¹

This is not to say that her work as a preacher has been an unwelcome interruption in her life as a writer. She has, after all, written a whole book on the joys and challenges of *The Preaching Life*, one in which she says, "If my own experience can be trusted, then God does not call us once but many times. There are calls to faith and calls to ordination, but in between there are calls to particular communities and calls to particular tasks within them."²

In this brief paper, I want to examine one dimension of Taylor's "particular task" of preaching, more specifically the use of scripture in Taylor's sermons.³ One could make a long list of the virtues of Taylor's sermons—their arresting imagery, their delightful blend of colloquial and poetic language, their subtle humor, and more. But I am persuaded that no small part of the creativity and power of her sermons comes from the way scripture gets interpreted and represented in them. If, as Taylor says with a measure of modest understatement, she found in her sermons "a way to use language that seemed to work for some people," a significant factor in their appeal is the way that biblical texts take on a fresh hearing in her preaching.

Taylor graduated from seminary in the mid-1970s, and her sermons, in terms of exegetical support, display in many ways the blend of historical and literary criticism of the Bible that was predominant at that time and that still prevails in many of the standard biblical commentaries. Taylor's sermons frequently show concrete evidence that she has done her exegetical homework and brought the fruits of her study to her sermons, albeit expressed in her refreshing and imaginative prose style.

¹ Quoted in Jordan Thrasher, "This Place That Has Made Us Kin: An Interview with Barbara Brown Taylor," *Flycatcher: A Journal of Native Imagination* (January 2012): www.flycatcherjournal.org/bbt-interview.php.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Lanham, Md.: Cowley Publications, 1993), 25.

³ For this paper, I have surveyed sermons in the following books by Taylor: *The Preaching Life* (Lanham, Md.: Cowley Publications, 1993), *Gospel Medicine* (Lanham, Md.: Cowley Publications, 1995), *Bread of Angels* (Lanham, Md.: Cowley Publications, 1997), *Mixed Blessings* (Lanham, Md.: Cowley Publications, 1998), *Home By Another Way* (Lanham, Md.: Cowley Publications, 1999), and *Seeds of Heaven* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2004).

Listen, for example, as she brings into play the historical background of an ancient covenant ceremony in a sermon on Genesis 15:

His name is still Abram, by the way—it is not until a couple of chapters later in Genesis that God changes his name to Abraham, meaning “father of a multitude.” In today’s story he is just plain old Abram, an elderly Jew without an heir who believes God’s promise of a son and a land, but would prefer proof. “O Lord God,” he asks, “how am I to know that I shall possess it?” So proof is what he gets: a covenant with God that takes place in the middle of the night among a whole barnyard of slaughtered animals. It is a rather bizarre scene to our modern eyes, but it was an accepted way of sealing a covenant in Abram’s day. Take a bunch of good-sized animals, halve them as neatly as you can, clear a path between the pieces, and require each partner to walk between them as a sort of self-curse. By passing through the severed bodies of the animals, each partner says, in effect, “May the same thing happen to me if I do not keep my word.” It is what we promise but never mean when we say, “Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.”⁴

Or again, here is Taylor on Jesus’ word that “the stars will be falling from heaven” in the “little apocalypse” in Mark 13:

By the time Mark wrote his words down some thirty years later, it seemed that the end was very near. The stars were still in the sky, but that was about all. The headlines were as bad then as they are now. Jerusalem lay in ruins. The temple was destroyed. The emperor’s favorite pastime was thinking up inventive new ways for Christians to die and there was fighting among the Christians themselves, with whole families being torn apart by their conflicting loyalties. False messiahs were setting themselves up on every street corner, each of them claiming exclusive access to the mind of God. Everything was falling apart, and those who had believed in Jesus must have wondered if they had been fooled. Surely this was not the way things were supposed to turn

⁴ Taylor, *Mixed Blessings*, 4.

out. Surely God had intended a nonviolent renovation of the world—a sort of huge urban renewal project—with loyal believers in charge. Not this chaos. Not this outrage. Not this darkness. That is when Mark told them the story again. . . .⁵

In these two examples (and many others that could be cited), I would contend that the exegetical, text-to-sermon process is fairly conventional, even as the expressions of the results are presented in vivid and memorable language. Bits and pieces of the texts, historically contextualized, are made understandable, accessible, and appealing through provocative imagery.

There is, however, another text-to-sermon tactic that Taylor frequently employs that is more original, more complex, even more creative, and perhaps more controversial. Here Taylor engages some character or characters in the text with empathetic imagination. That is, as an act of biblical interpretation, she envisions the biblical characters as if they were people like us who are in contemporary life circumstances existentially and emotionally analogous to those in the biblical text. Then, in the sermon, Taylor presents those characters as responding to life with similar attitudes and emotions to those her listeners would have. So, instead of moving hermeneutically back to the text in its historical setting, she effectively moves the text forward. Biblical characters are still clothed in ancient dress, but emotionally and intellectually they feel, think, and respond to life more or less like sophisticated moderns.

Here, for example, is Taylor describing the priest Zechariah in Luke 1, when an angel appears to him in the Temple to announce that his elderly wife Elizabeth will bear a son, and Zechariah is said to be “terrified”:

If you ask me, he was scared because he was thinking about Elizabeth instead of the incense. . . . “How will I know that this is so?” he asked the terrible angel. “For I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years.” It was an awful moment, one of those thudding *faux-pas* that make you wish you could start over again, like when your beloved gives you the very present you asked for and the first thing you say is, “How much did that cost?”

⁵ Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, 148.

“How will I know that this is so?” The commentaries call Zechariah’s question the sin of disbelief, but I wonder about that. You might also call it a failure of imagination, a fear of disappointment, a habit of hopelessness. He had waited a long time for something that was systematically denied him. He had gotten used to not being heard. How was he supposed to know that this time would be different?

...

Wherever this story is told, Zechariah’s muteness is treated as his punishment for doubt. . . . [But] it seems entirely possible to me that his silence was the angel’s gift to him—an enforced sabbatical, a gestation period of his own during which the seeds of hope were sown again in his hushed soul.⁶

Or again, here is Taylor describing the Old Testament character of Joseph, the dreamer:

When Joseph wanted to hear the voice of God, he listened to his life—to his dreams, to the people he met along the way, to the things that happened to him each day. These were how God spoke to him and he learned to be a good interpreter of them, paying close attention to all the events of his life, even the ones that hurt and frightened him, the ones that seemed to go against the will of God. They may not have made sense to him one by one, but by the time his brothers showed up he could see the pattern. No one explained it to him, but he could see God’s fingerprints all over the place.⁷

Now, who knows whether the biblical Joseph listened to “his life—to his dreams, to the people he met along the way,” but this is what spiritually alert contemporary people do, and Joseph is transformed into one of them. This move finds an antecedent in Italian renaissance painting, in which Christ, Mary, and the saints are depicted, not as they were in earlier art as transcendent iconic figures, but, in the words of Charles Taylor, as “human beings very much present in our time, as people whom we might meet in our own world.”⁸ Charles

⁶ Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, 93–94.

⁷ Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, 126.

⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007), 144.

Taylor notes that some critics see this already as a move toward secularization, but that he disagrees. "On the contrary," he writes, "it should rather be seen as part of the attempt to bring faith closer to everyday life. It bespeaks rather a strong Incarnational spirituality, an attempt to see/imagine Jesus and Mary as having really been among us, hallowing the ordinary contexts of life, in which we also live."⁹

Moreover, what Barbara Taylor is doing here is a twist on what literary critics and media specialists have called "identification with character." Professor of Communication Jonathan Cohen of the University of Haifa, who has studied the interaction of readers and viewers with characters in novels and films, has defined "identification with character" as "an imaginative process invoked as a response to characters presented within mediated texts."¹⁰ Identification with a character is "fleeting" and arrayed across a spectrum from weak to strong, but when it happens a reader, a viewer (or a sermon listener) to some degree "imagines him or herself," writes Cohen, "being that character and replaces his or her personal identity and role as audience member with the identity and role of the character within the text."¹¹

In a novel, in a television series involving multiple episodes, or even in a movie, there is time to develop identification with character, and there are well-established techniques to create this bonding.¹² In a sermon, however, there is not time, so Taylor moves identification in the other direction. Listeners do not identify with biblical characters; rather, biblical characters identify with the listeners. I do not see myself as ancient Zechariah; I see Zechariah as someone quite a bit like me. Once this reverse identification is established, then Taylor can lace the listeners to the theological or ethical claims she finds in the text. Hear how she does this with the mute Zechariah whom the angel has placed on "enforced sabbatical":

I like to think of Zechariah as the patron saint of the twenty-first-century church. Like him, we have been waiting a long

⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 144.

¹⁰ Jonathan Cohen, "Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences with Media Characters," *Mass Communication & Society* 4.3 (2001): 250.

¹¹ Cohen, "Defining Identification," 251.

¹² See, for example, Keith Oatley, "A Taxonomy of the Emotions of Literary Response and a Theory of Identification in Fictional Narrative," *Poetics* 23 (1994): 53–74, and Keith Oatley, "Meeting of Minds: Dialogue, Sympathy, and Identification in Reading Fiction," *Poetics* 26 (1999): 439–454.

time for our prayers to be heard. "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again," we say over and over again. But where is he, exactly, and how much longer must we wait? It is hard to know what to say when people ask us where God is. Have faith? Be patient? Prayer works? Our words have gotten as old and tired as we have, and in many cases people have stopped believing us. They ask us the same thing Zechariah asked his angel. "How will we know that this is so?" Maybe it is time for us to claim the angel's gift of silence again—to stop talking so much, to stop trying to explain, to shut our mouths before the terrible mystery of God and see what the quiet has to teach us.¹³

In other words, Taylor does not link biblical characters to contemporary listeners as an end in itself, but as a bridge to allow the hearers to make their own the overarching theological claims of texts. This fulfills what Taylor herself describes as her theological stance toward scripture. She writes:

If I am not careful, I can decide that I am really much happier reading my Bible than I am entering into what God is doing in my own time and place, since shutting the book to go outside will involve the very great risk of taking part in stories that are still taking shape. Neither I nor anyone else knows how these stories will turn out, since at this point they involve more blood than ink. The whole purpose of the Bible, it seems to me, is to convince people to set the written word down in order to become living words in the world for God's sake. For me, this willing conversion of ink back to blood is the full substance of faith.¹⁴

While the danger of this approach is that the scripture becomes merely the tales of characters who are domesticated urbanites like ourselves and who simply mirror our own anxieties and ambiguities, in the skillful hands of a preacher like Barbara Brown Taylor we are allowed to engage again and in fresh ways the life-giving claims of scripture.

¹³ Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, 95.

¹⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 107.

