**A Coach Approach to Preaching
by Paul M. Burns, M.Div.**

One of my favorite Christmas carols is “Go Tell It on the Mountain.” The chorus goes:

*Go* *tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere;
Go, tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born.*

As a preacher, I have concluded many a Christmas service with this chorus as a charge to the congregation to say that the role of “telling” is not just the role of the preacher, but of every believer. The basic assumption is that the preacher and all believers serve as heralds for the new reality found in Jesus Christ. If we shout out the truth of the gospel message loud enough, often enough, and from the highest places of society then eventually the world will be transformed into God’s new creation. It is a powerful thing to first hear that there is a way out of slavery into freedom. But for true change to take place there must be people who serve as agents of transformation, who facilitate movement through a process from an old reality to a new reality.

In 21st century America, over 2000 years since Jesus Christ was born, in a Church that has been shrinking in numbers and influence, the role of the herald, one who tells news, must change. Sunday after Sunday preachers climb up the mountain and shout that Jesus Christ is born to a crowd of people who have heard the news, but are wondering what difference does it make and what are they to do in response to it? At the same time, we live in a culture that has an increasing distrust of institutions including the religious variety. People do not tend to do or believe things just because they are told to do them or believe them. Preachers cannot simply tell people what to do and think, and expect their flock to follow blindly and dumbly. An internal shift must take place within the Church regarding the role of preacher in order for external shifts to take place within the culture with which the Church seeks to engage. The Church needs people who serve as agents of transformation, who facilitate movement through a process from an old reality to a new reality. Preachers are in a position to serve in this role if we would consider taking a radically different approach, a coach approach.

The great link between coaching and preaching is that both practices are aimed at evoking transformation in others. The great difference is that one is a conversation while the other is in the form of prepared speech. This reality presents a great challenge in seeking a coach approach to preaching. One cannot simply take coaching principles and lay them over our traditional understanding of preaching. Preaching must be wholly reimagined in a coaching framework.

Preaching at its core is the communication of God’s truth where people are. It can be done by any person in whose heart God places his Word. If we assume that every congregation is full of resources, creativity, and is fully capable of becoming exactly what God created it to be by the power of the Holy Spirit then it will be freed to speak God’s Word. It will emerge organically. Preaching will happen. God’s Word will be communicated by many mouths.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann defines the preaching event as when “One person or more gets up in front of the congregation in order to preach the gospel…These people come from the community but come forward in front of it and act in Christ’s name.”[[1]](#footnote--1) Christ is made present through the cooperative work of the preacher(s), the congregation, and the Holy Spirit. Because Christ is present and speaking then there is great power present capable of evoking transformation amongst all who have ears to hear. And yet, we greatly limit the power of the preaching event when we limit it to one voice. There is much greater power when Christ is represented through many voices. As a preacher, I have found that it is a powerfully transformative thing to speak God’s words. The same can be true for anyone. Why should the speaking of truth be limited to one person each week? Some of the most powerful proclamations of God’s truth have come from the most unlikely of people. But this can only happen when preachers are willing to step aside and make room for other voices.

During worship and at different times throughout the week, the preacher stands before a deep reservoir of resources, creativity, and power placed there by God. A coach approach to preaching is aimed toward drawing out the potential that exists and allowing God to communicate not only *to* his people, but also *through* his people. The preacher serves more as a conductor of a symphony orchestra, who draws out the composition that came from the mind of the Composer; who shapes and paces; who asks for more and holds back at times. The preacher evokes the words that God has written upon the hearts of his people by the Holy Spirit.

So how might one go about a coach approach to preaching?

**The Intersection of Coaching and Preaching**

Preachers prepare in many different ways, but the stereotypical image is of a pastor locked away in a stuffy library slaving away in isolation. A coach approach will require the preacher to step out of isolation into a group setting open to as many voices as possible.

To approach preaching as a coach let us consider the general shape of a coaching conversation. A helpful model comes from coach Jane Creswell is the Hourglass Model:

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The top of the hourglass represents the portion of the conversation where the coach helps the client to clarify the focus of the conversation. The center is the confirmation of an actionable focus. And the bottom is for exploring, identifying, and aligning actions with focus.[[3]](#footnote-1) A pastor taking a coach approach to preaching essentially leads the congregation through the hourglass centered on a scriptural focus. Rather than beginning where a person is, in preaching we begin with scripture, the Word of God. The top part of the hourglass is the exegesis of scripture. Scripture then moves into people’s lives, which is at the center of the hourglass. The bottom half of the hourglass is then the people’s response to what is revealed in the scripture. In a coach approach to preaching, the process of preaching does not all happen in a slotted time on Sunday. It can happen over the period of a week or even over months. It is an ongoing conversation between God and people through scripture facilitated by a preacher. But there are moments when that conversation is lifted up before the whole of the congregation. We might call this the preaching event.

**Exegesis: A Process of Listening and Drawing Out**

The literal meaning of the Greek word *exegesis* is *to lead out* or *draw out*. The opposite of exegesis is *eisegesis,* which literally means *to lead in* and is understood to mean one's own presuppositions, agendas, or biases into and onto the text. The ancient Greek usage means *to advise or propose*. It is inevitable that the preacher’s biases and agendas find a way to creep into their presentation of scripture, which lead to advising and proposing, but preachers must be very wary of the pull toward eisegesis.

Coaching is exegesis. Coaches draw out or lead out what dwells within a person and must resist the urge to advise, propose, and insert their own agendas and biases into their conversations. Exegesis begins with careful listening. We must let the text and the people speak and hear them in their context before taking it into our own. And we must listen carefully for the nudging and whispering of the Holy Spirit. In a sense, good exegesis is good coaching. A coach approach might have two types of exegesis: 1) of the scriptural text, 2) of the local context both inside and outside of the congregation.

**Exegesis of Scripture: Coaching the Text**

After conducting our own exegesis of scripture we might consider bringing it into a group setting. Consider facilitating a weekly Bible study based on the chosen preaching text. Let the text speak through the voices of the group. Note the questions that arise. Do more listening and asking questions than instructing. Preachers have more to gain from listening to the voices of others than listening to their own voices.

Three possible questions the preacher might ask the group are: 1) What does the text say? 2) What does it say to you and today’s world? 3) And what action, if any, is it asking of you as the reader? Take notes along the way. We all hear things differently. And it will allow us to bring the voices of the congregation into the pulpit with us. Assuming the study group is fairly representative of the broader congregation it will help the preacher speak more directly into its context. It would be even more helpful if people in the neighborhood who are not members of the church or particularly, if they are not a member of any church, would participate in the study. The more diverse the study the more rich the results will be.

Finally, we seek to discover a focus that has relevance to the hearers both you and others. Often the focus will simply emerge if all the others steps are followed. It will have been voiced by the text itself and through the plethora of voices that have engaged it throughout the week. If the preacher has listened carefully and drawn out the meaning of the text through thoughtful questioning, the focus will state itself. Thomas Long recommends finishing the following sentence before moving to the next phase of sermon preparation: “In relation to those who will hear the sermon, what this text wants to say and do is…”[[4]](#footnote-2) To finish such a sentence a preacher must know the local context to which he speaks as well as possible.

**Local Context, Both Inside and Outside the Congregation**

Exegesis of the local context is an ongoing activity for a pastor who regularly preaches from the same pulpit. Rather than reading a text the preacher must now read people and draw out what is in their hearts and minds. Pastors may learn a lot about the congregations they serve just through the inevitable regular interactions they have with their parishioners. However, those interactions could be greatly enhanced by taking a more intentional approach.

Every conversation can go much deeper than talking about sports, the weather, or even just listening to the stream of complaints and concerns of well-meaning people. Every interaction is an opportunity to draw out the heart and mind of a person. It starts with listening for the deeper meaning behind words. When pastors ask parishioners, “How are you doing?” they should be prepared for real answers. Here are examples of questions that can create greater opportunity for drawing out what lies beneath the churchy surface of parishioners:

“How are things really going in your life right now?”

“What matters to you most these days?”

“How would you like your life (or the church) to be different?”

I think it would be very valuable to always have a question or two ready for anytime you have at least a few minutes to spend, whether it is sitting in the waiting room at the doctor’s office, sharing a cup of coffee at a church function, or in an old-fashioned pastor visitation.

It would be a mistake to assume that the only people who come to worship on the following Sunday will all be regulars. One would hope that there would be some visitors who may or may not have any experience with church. For this reason it would be valuable to seek meaningful conversation with people who live and/or work near the church. Exegete the cashier at the local grocery store or gas station. Exegete teachers at the elementary school around the corner. Talk and listen to people coming and going when the opportunity arises. Get to know how lives are being lived and what concerns people.

I recently found myself sitting in a car dealership office across from a man who was from another country. I was somewhat perturbed that I had to wait so long, but I decided to make the most of the situation and so I decided to ask him about his life. He told me about how he had to flee from his home in Iran with his two year old child because he was not Muslim. He has made a new life in America but the economy has been hard on him. He began to tear up telling me the story. My preaching text for the week was the story of Joseph taking his family and fleeing to Egypt to escape King Herod. This man’s story deepened my understanding of the Biblical story and deepened my understanding of what it means to be an immigrant in my community. The sermon that week would have been flatter, weaker, and less engaging had I not engaged this man and his story.

**The Preaching Event, Not the Preacher’s Event**

Whether a preacher totally scripts the sermon, prepares an outline, or uses a power point, it is what is actually said and done in the event of preaching before the congregation that truly constitutes preaching. This is the point where one must ask: Can this preaching event really be considered coaching if coaching is a dialogue not a monologue?

It begins with the preacher’s basic assumption of his role in the congregation and the role of preaching. If the preacher assumes that this event is about the preacher, then he is not coaching or even preaching in any biblical sense. But if the preacher sees preaching as a cooperative effort between her, the congregation, and the Holy Spirit in representing Christ within a current and local context, then it can be coaching. If the preacher sees herself as more resourceful, creative, whole, and valuable than everyone else in the room then it is not coaching. But if the preacher sees himself as a facilitator in increasing awareness, inviting others into the process of discovery, and presenting choices for others to make on their own and in their own way then it can be coaching.

A coach approach to preaching demands that multiple voices be heard. If week after week, the congregation only hears the voice of the pastor then they will believe that his voice is the one that counts. Here are a few ways multiple voices can be heard:

1. Lift up the stories of members of the congregation in the sermon.
2. Invite members of the congregation to preach or share their story. This will require some coaching. It will help others find their voice in sharing the gospel and inspire others to do the same.
3. Team preaching. Invite a few members of the congregation to join you in a preaching event.
4. Moderate a panel discussion centered on a scripture text with questions developed out of the focus and function.
5. Allow for time during the sermon for short, focused breakout sessions.

Ultimately, it is the work of the Holy Spirit that makes it the proclamation of God’s Word. For a preacher who chooses to take a coach approach to preaching, there is a surrendering of control that must happen. The preacher must be open to the Spirit and must be aware of what is happening in the moment. Amazing things can happen when a preacher surrenders to a cooperative effort trusting that Christ will be present and will be heard. The last thing a preacher should want is for people leaving to say to themselves, “That sure was one great preacher.” Preachers taking a coach approach hope for people to leave with a greater awareness of who God is and who they are in light of God, and empowered to take life-giving and life-changing steps.

**What Happens Next?**

If everyone or even some left with those things in their heart and mind, then we can rejoice, but it might be helpful to lay out some more concrete steps to foster greater discovery and growth. Here are three potential ways to give those present an opportunity to take a further step in the process:

1. Lead or have someone else lead a community conversation after the service around the key issues arising from the text and the sermon.
2. Create a small group study made up of three questions focused on creating awareness of self, of God, and leading to action to accompany the sermon and place the insert in the bulletin.
3. End the service by offering an assignment stemming from the function of the sermon that encourages creative and cooperative action.

Coaching always encourages intentional action.

**Conclusion**

The Church is in great need of preachers who are skilled in the process of transformation by focusing more on the exploration of truth than the declaration of it; more on inviting others in to a process of discovery of God’s will than prescribing Godly living; more on giving voice to others than making oneself the expert and higher authority. It needs preachers who assume that the Church is full of creativity, resources, and is in a process of becoming whole. It needs preachers who draw out God’s Word from many hearts and through many voices. It needs preachers to come down from the mountain of expert status and into the valleys where lives are lived and invite others into the process of climbing the mountain of the Lord together. It needs preachers who take a coach approach.

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1. Long, Thomas G. *The Witness of Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 1989. 199 [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Miller, Linda J. and Chad W. Hall. *Coaching for Christian Leaders: A Practical Guide*. St. Louis: Chalice Press. 2007. 54

 [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Miller, 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. Long, 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)