

Mysterium Tremendum Restored in the Life of the Preacher

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My Story: An Alarming Experience

What is your most unforgettable preaching experience? Did it happen just last week or last year? Or did it happen five or ten years ago? For me it happened immediately after my graduation from my M.Div. program.

I had arrived in New Haven from Atlanta after a twenty-hour drive to attend Yale Divinity School. I am rather a slow driver, and it had taken me almost three days and about ten fast food hamburgers to get to New Haven. That very afternoon, I got a phone call from the deacon of a local Korean American Methodist church. He said that the senior pastor was on vacation, the usual guest preacher was out of town, and they urgently needed a preacher for the Wednesday night worship service. Would I come? There'd be only a few people there for worship, and all I needed to do was deliver a brief message and join them in fellowship.

So I went to the church at the appointed time in a remote mountain area. Indeed, the church was so remote that at one point even my GPS got lost. In the sanctuary I found two people sitting in the very front pew. They seemed to be a couple in their sixties, and they were playing an old hymn CD on an old CD player before the service started—apparently, there was no pianist. As I walked toward the lectern from the back of the sanctuary, the old man, probably the deacon who had called me, stood up, turned off the CD player, and sat down again beside his wife. Just like that, at eight o'clock on a Wednesday night, I found myself standing at the pulpit with the elderly couple in the front pew humbly ready to listen to the Word of God from a young preacher. At that moment—I mean, right at that moment—I saw a beautiful image, a beautiful face, the face of God in the faces of the elderly couple. In their faces, ready to receive the Word of God, God was there. Just as Adam and Eve, the first human beings on the earth, were created in the image of God, the old couple had the image of God in their faces.

Yet, encountering “God’s face” in the two elderly people’s presence is one thing, and preaching only before two people another. To be honest, I was crying in the pulpit. Indeed, I started crying even before the worship service started, sitting at the back of the sanctuary and seeing the two elderly people waiting for their preacher in that old rusty hillside church. With tears rolling down my cheeks and standing at the pulpit, I just didn’t know what to say, at that moment. Then, I found myself quietly praying:

My Lord! After seven years of study in theology and preparation in ministry, now I have two elderly people before me. Here I stand, to preach—to say your holy word. Would you help me to say a word, just a word?

Ironically and paradoxically, that was the moment when I became a better Christian; no more theological embellishment and no more fake luxury in faith. And indeed that was the moment when I was humbly transformed into a preacher, a mouthpiece of the Most Holy God. Oh, I’d taken as many preaching classes as possible during my just-completed M.Div. degree: the

Introduction to Preaching class, Sermon Development and Delivery class, Lectionary Preaching class, Narrative Preaching class, Theology for Preaching class, and one independent study with the famous Dr. Thomas G. Long. Along with these, I had my individual research on Rev. Dr. King Jr., the champion of the Civil Rights Movement. So, I had believed myself to be prepared for any text and any situation thanks to that unmatched homiletic training and education. I thought I knew what to preach and how to preach in any circumstance. But, in that old sanctuary on a remote small mountain, I couldn't preach at all. Why? Was it because there were only two elderly believers there? Was it because I was too tired? Or because I felt too lonely in a strange place? Maybe. But, as I look back, there was one crucial reason why I couldn't preach: I had not yet truly been inspired by what Rudolf Otto called the *mysterium tremendum* of the Word of Christ.

Insights from Isaiah and Otto

Otto, an eminent German theologian of the twentieth century, once said that the true or genuine encounter with God or the encounter with the Word of Christ for Christians is experienced as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.¹ That is, God or the Word of Christ, is fundamentally a mystery by which a human being both trembles and is fascinated or both repelled and attracted at the same time. Indeed, this is the most genuine spiritual encounter that a human being can experience, one which utterly shatters the tainted soul of any human, yet also creates the ultimate hope, love, mercy, and desire for justice in the human mind.

Do we preachers today still encounter the Word, the Bible, as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*? I suggest that this is one of the biggest problems that preachers are facing today. Bluntly speaking, to a great extent we preachers have lost the feeling of the encounter with the *mysterium tremendum*. Do we have any good solutions to that problem? Browsing the latest homiletics books might help some. Yet, the ancient call narrative of Isaiah seems to suggest something more fundamental:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.’

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: ‘Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!’ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’ (Isaiah 6:1-8, NRSV)

What do we see in the text from a homiletic perspective, from a preacher's perspective? Three things: First, we see the mysterious Word of God visiting a human being, the trembling

¹ For Otto, *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* describes the “determinate affective state” of the human mind or feeling gripped or stirred by that which is an inexpressible mystery revealed. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, John W. Harvey trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 12-40.

preacher. Second, we see God or God's messengers touching the preacher's mouth, cleansing it, and making it holy. Third and last, God asks, "Whom shall I send?" The preacher, now with great inspiration and fascination answers, "Lord, here I am. Send me!" What this would-be ancient preacher Isaiah is going through is the unparalleled experience of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* in the mystery of the captivating Word of the Most Holy God. Many preachers these days in the ministry field have lost this encounter of *mysterium* in their preaching practices, just as I felt lost in the pulpit when I arrived in the New Haven area after my preaching course-filled M.Div.

Many possible reasons for this loss of *mysterium* in the life of the preacher come to mind: theological education that is too rationalistic, ineffective ministerial field practice, our lack of ongoing spiritual practice, secularism's penetration into the preacher's mind and heart, the local church's indifference to the encounter of *mysterium*, the absence of adequate homiletic or hermeneutical tools for today's postmodern context, etc. The list could go on. Yet no single reason can be true of every preacher. We all have our individual reasons for the loss of this *mysterium*. Nonetheless, what we all have in common is a great need for the *mysterium* to reinvigorate our preaching lives.

Toward Preaching Reinvigorated

That this *mysterium* be restored in the ongoing preaching life is crucial—not only for the sake of the preacher's healthy spiritual life, but also for all the hearers of preaching in the pews. In order for this proposal to be actualized in the practice of preaching, I propose a creative hermeneutical approach to the preacher's weekly exegesis/interpretation of the Word² and in a more fundamental sense to preaching education at the seminary: namely, the holistic-aesthetical encounter of the Word. This holistic-aesthetical approach requires, first, reconceptualizing of biblical exegesis and, second, imaginative-artistic interpretation of the Word.

First, both in preaching education and preaching practice we have a misguided conception that the first task of preaching is *to go to* the text or *to interpret* the text. Yet, Isaiah's example shows us the very opposite. *The Word comes to us first. The Word encounters us first. And the Word transforms us first.* Homiletically, this means that we had better to develop a good habit of humbling ourselves and letting the Word visit and stir our very inner selves *first*. When we "go to the text," we often become too analytic, too investigative, too rationalistic, too logical, and too dull to encounter the lively, transformative energy and spirit of the living Word.

Second, one of the best ways for the Word to visit and stir our holistic selves is experiencing that Word in an imaginative-artistic way. Otto proposed that art is a wonderful

² For this essay, I prefer to use the term "the Word" to "the text" or "the Bible" as a way of emphasizing the preacher's lively encounter with the biblical message of the Triune God.

medium through which the human experience of the numinous³ can be made possible and also be expressed.⁴ Art not only mediates the transcendent sphere into fundamental human existence in an ontological sense, he says, but also renders the experience of the divine seeable, hearable, touchable, “tastable,” and even “smellable” in this physical world.⁵ John W. De Gruchy, a Reformed theologian, goes a step further than Otto when he claims that truth and goodness alone are not sufficient “to convince and therefore to save,” and that the aesthetical rendering of truth and goodness is required for the full salvific action of the divine.⁶ Thus, experiencing the Word, namely the Divine mystery, in an imaginative-aesthetic or creative-artistic way is quite indispensable for any fine Christian spirituality. This *must* be so especially when it comes to the preacher’s encounter of the Word in his or her exegetical process, the first step of preaching preparation. The Word fully and holistic-artistically experienced by the preacher will eventually end up fully and mysterious-aesthetically touching, healing, and transforming the souls of the hearers. Toward that end, I suggest that practicing preachers explore and adopt the following creative-aesthetic ways of doing biblical exegesis:

- Compose a song on the given text
- Draw a picture from their imagination of the text
- Create (lawful) street graffiti based on the text
- Film a short movie based on the text
- Talk about the text with random people on the street
- Create a magic show based on the text
- Choreograph a dance on the text
- Compose a poem on the text
- Find a song and conduct a choir on the text
- *Literally* perform or practice what the text *literally* states
- Make a costume or prop (e.g., a shoe, a weapon, a tool, etc.) for the biblical scene
- Perform a short play based on the text
- Perform a stand-up comedy routine based on the text
- Draw a four-panel comic to illustrate the text
- Make bread or something else based on the text
- Retell the same story from a very different narrator’s or character’s perspective

³ Otto uses the term “numinous” in order to name a particular state of the mind experiencing *numen*. The numinous state or status of the mind cannot be taught or learned, rather “it can only be evoked, awakened in the mind; as everything that comes of the spirit must be awakened.” The *mysterium tremendum* is the fundamental nature and manifestation of being numinous, especially in terms of “feeling.” Otto adopts the Latin term *numen* in order to designate the very primal concept of holy. He thinks that the current religious use of “holy” is imbued with a sense of the moral or ethical good. That is, when people think of the concept of something holy, they automatically regard the thing as good. This whole situation has relegated the concept of the holy to the rational sphere. Yet Otto argues that the primal concept of holy or *numen* cannot and should not be reduced to something other than itself by moralization or rationalization. It should speak for itself. Ibid., 5-7, 11-12.

⁴ Ibid., 65-71.

⁵ “Tastable” and “smellable” of course are not correct English, indeed. Nevertheless, I use these words as they seem to articulate the very meanings I want to express.

⁶ John W. De Gruchy, “Holy Beauty: A Reformed Perspective on Aesthetics within a World of Ugly Injustice,” in *Reformed Theology for the Third Christian Millennium*, ed. B. A. Gerrish (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003), 15.

All these creative-artistic experiences and interpretations of the Word will certainly help the preacher see various facets of the Word and holistically experience It. I can easily imagine that a preaching classroom that begins with such aesthetic encounters will be full of new insightful findings on the Word, spiritual sparks ignited by the Word, and great joy as a result of the Word's transformative power and soulful healing.⁷

Exiting with Hope

My hope is that preachers experience the daily and weekly staple of the Sacred Word as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* in their ongoing preaching life. The holistic-aesthetic approach surely can help toward that end. As I look back on my life, *mysterium* was first revealed to me that Wednesday night when I was crying in the pulpit before the two angelic, elderly people. God's loving, caring, and challenging face showed in the faces of the two elders. That was indeed my own "Isaiah moment." It was both so beautiful and so mystical. I was only able to begin and finish my sermon because I was facing that blissful face of the Divine. The same Divine face still keeps me going by whispering into my ears from time to time, "preach . . . preach . . . in your seeing of My Face."

⁷ I am not certainly against conventional historical-critical exegesis of the text for preaching. I'd rather argue that the conventional methodology can and should be supplemented by the holistic-aesthetic methodology. An extended discussion on this holistic-aesthetic pedagogy of preaching appears in my forthcoming article in *Theology Today*, vol. 74 no. 1 (January, 2017).