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Calvin Institute of Christian Worship

2023 Calvin Symposium on Worship

Session A3

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Wednesday, February 8 2:45 PM

Calvin Seminary Auditorium

Vivid Imagery? “Mark has his own way of telling us about Jesus. When Mark gets his Gospel going, what he really wants to say is that in Jesus Christ God is on the loose. God is on the loose, and we’re never safe from God’s liberating power. It’s as if Mark says to us: “Friends, believe the good news. In Jesus Christ, God is *after* you.”

In his Gospel, Mark is telling us what the human problem is, and he’s telling us how Jesus is the answer to it. Our problem is not that we keep banging our heads on the glass ceiling as we try to go home to God. Oh no. Just the opposite. As Professor Donald Juel remarks, the heavens get torn open during Jesus’s baptism (Mark 1:10) not so that we can get at God, but so that God can get at *us*.¹ God wants to get at us because we’re fugitives. We’re runaways. We’re like Cain or Jonah or the prodigal son.

And now, says Mark, because the heavens have been ripped open God has gotten out. God is coming after us in the person of Jesus. Jesus brings God a lot closer to people than they want, and when Jesus does this, he frightens. Jesus in Mark 5 isn’t a gentle Savior who gathers kindergarteners onto his lap. This is a rough Savior who battles demons in a graveyard. This is a Savior who starts two thousand hogs on a death march. This is a Savior with fire in his eye.”

¹ Donald Juel, “Reflections on Mark’s Gospel,” St. Olaf Conference on Theology and Music, St. Olaf College, July

Under the Wings of God, p. 16

Good Stories? “In the filmed version (1962) of Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Gregory Peck plays Atticus Finch, an attorney of clean hands and pure heart. There’s a place toward the end of the film that often comes to my mind. Atticus Finch has just done his best for Tom Robinson, a Black man falsely accused of rape in small town Alabama in the 1930s. Atticus is eloquent and passionate about Tom Robinson’s innocence, and he’s right about it, but a racist jury convicts Tom anyway. Then, at the end, all the white people leave the main floor of the courtroom—the place reserved for them. But all the Black people in the balcony stay right where they are. Tom Robinson’s friends and loved ones are all crowded together up there, and they won’t leave! They won’t leave before Atticus Finch does, the man who poured himself out for their loved one.

Well, the leader of the group is Tom Robinson’s minister, who has shepherded Atticus Finch’s children into a place in the balcony where they can watch the trial through the banister. Now it’s all over, *but the Blacks won’t leave!* They saw Atticus Finch lose, but they also saw him fight his heart out for Tom Robinson, and as Atticus walks out of the courtroom, all the people in the balcony silently rise to their feet in respect for a man of integrity. And the minister speaks to Atticus’s daughter, who is sitting at his feet. “Stand up, Miss Jean Louise,” he says. “Stand up, girl. *Your father’s passin’!*” *Under the Wings*, pp. 53-54.

Getting the Text Right? “We find ourselves surprised that Jesus is so impressed by children. In Luke 18 Jesus blesses some babies, and then he says to his disciples, Look here. You ought to be like this. The kingdom of God belongs to people just like this. In fact, you’re never going to “get it” unless you learn to receive the kingdom the way they do.

Like a child. And here, of course, is where centuries of preachers have gotten sentimental. This is the place in the sermon where we hear of all the virtues of children, including the imaginary ones. But Jesus wasn’t sentimental about children. So, in Luke 18 Jesus doesn’t say how sweet children are. He doesn’t tell us they’re special. He says nothing about the trusting look in a child’s eye. All these things may be true, but Jesus is interested in something else. When Jesus

Christ blesses an infant—and Luke does use the word for “infant” here—when Jesus blesses an infant what he sees is a bundle of need. Infants are needy people. And so, in first century Palestine they are lowly people. . . .

Jesus looks at an infant and sees a person on the bottom rung of society. As Joel Green writes, first-century children were lowly because they had nothing to give.² They didn’t produce anything. They didn’t contribute anything to village life. *Infants* can’t build a barn or dig a well.

They just lie around all day. All they produce is waste.

There’s just one thing infants are really good at. One thing they can do better than all the rest of us. One lesson they can teach us all. Jesus Christ points to infants because they are *perfectly wonderful receivers*! They don’t produce very much, but are they ever great at receiving! Nudge an infant with a nipple or a fingertip or almost anything else, and her mouth opens, and she will suck like a whirlpool. A healthy infant knows how to take nourishment from food, and she knows how to take it from love. And it’s a good thing, too, because without these gifts she will die.” *Under the Wings*, pp. 87-88.

Good Things to be Learned from other Preachers’ Sermons? E.g., from Frederick Buechner, Timothy Keller, Barbara Brown Taylor, William Willimon, Eugene Peterson, Gardner Taylor, Mary Hulst, Deborah Block, etc.

Rhetorical features—Diction? Clarity? Coherence? Evocativeness? Rhetorical pitch: Tuxedo? Tank top? Business casual? Economy? Too economical? Poetry? Uses of repetition, incl. refrains? Effective beginnings and endings?

Respect for Scripture?

Use of images, stories, examples, etc. in coordination with more declarative, didactic, explanatory material. How many beads on the string? And where are they in the sermon?

Sensitivity to preaching context.

² Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, ed. Gordon D. Fee, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 650–51.

Esp. from audio and most esp. from video recordings--pace, tone, uses of silence, uses of visuals incl. film clips, body language, gestures.