

## 15 | Hearing Sermons and the Vision of God

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### Introduction

The theme of our conference explores how the pictures of God that we create in a sermon relate to listeners that inhabit a fragmented existence. The human condition is fragmented in itself. We rather live in ruins, the late German practical-theologian Henning Luther emphatically states.<sup>1</sup> We have lost the idea of a harmonious world and an idealized view of the coherence of human identity. We are instead fragments of our past as well as fragments of our future. Or as Luther puts it:

We are always simultaneously ruins of our past, fragments of broken hopes, decaying wishes, rejected possibilities, forfeited opportunities. . . . On the other hand, every stage of development of the human self is only a fragment from the future. The fragment also carries the seed of time. Its essence is yearning.<sup>2</sup>

Henning Luther's insight into the *human condition* does not concern only highly individualized Western European societies. It also concerns the relationships among cultures, the fragments of world peace, and the ruins of justice for all. The world is only a shadow, or a fragment, of the shining beauty of the promised Kingdom of God. Preachers have the exciting and difficult calling to picture this Kingdom, to evoke a sense of salvation and the presence of Christ. In this light, the paper discusses two questions: are

<sup>1</sup>Luther, *Religion und Alltag*.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 168-169.

sermons capable of offering glimpses of God? And, how does that happen from the point of view of the listener? After a brief introduction in sermon reception theory, I explore some visual metaphors that are used by hearers when they talk about their listening experiences. Next, I put the empirical findings in a larger theological framework of the ‘vision of God’. Finally, I relate this eschatological idea with an homiletic epistemology and I discuss how sermons may generate religious knowledge in various degrees.

### A Brief Religious Theory of Hearing Sermons

The paper discusses some findings of my doctoral research in sermon reception.<sup>3</sup> Following the methodical canons of Grounded Theory<sup>4</sup> I discovered a few theoretical patterns in qualitatively gathered data that are relevant to the topic of our conference ‘Picturing God in a fragmented world.’ In my PhD research I developed an empirical theological theory on getting religiously involved in hearing sermons. The scope of this paper does not allow me to deal extensively with theory as developed from empirical material. A brief sketch will suffice though.

In hearing sermons, as the argument in my book follows, listeners engage in a socio-religious process. It is a social process because hearing sermons is deeply embedded in interhuman communication, the interaction between a preacher and his audience. It concerns all sorts of psychological and social behavior. It is also a religious process because hearing sermons is a way of interacting with God’s Word, entering in a dialogue of faith, and holding on to the promises of the Gospel. Hearing sermons is practicing religion, as the central claim of the book may be summarized.

Since a process consists of various stages of phases<sup>5</sup>, having a beginning

<sup>3</sup>T. T. J. Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons. A Grounded Theory Study in Empirical Theology and Homiletics*, (Eburon Academic Publishers, 2010). Sermon reception currently enjoys much scholarly attention based on the amount of studies that have been released internationally: R. J. Allen, *Hearing the Sermon*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004); M. A. Mulligan and R. J. Allen, *Believing in Preaching. What listeners hear in sermons*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005); C. Stark, *Proeven van de preek. Een praktisch-theologisch onderzoek naar de preek als Woord van God*, (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2005); H. Schaap-Jonker, *Before the Face of God. An Interdisciplinary Study of the Meaning of the Sermon and the Hearer’s God Image, Personality and Affective State*, (Berlin: LIT, 2008); H. Schwier and S. Gall, *Predigt Hören. Befunde und Ergebnisse der Heidelberger Umfrage zur Predigtrezeption*, (Berlin: LIT, 2008).

<sup>4</sup>Cf. K. Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory. A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*, (London: Sage, 2006) and A. Bryant and K. Charmaz, editors, *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*, (Sage Publications, 2007).

<sup>5</sup>B. G. Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity. Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory*, (Sociology Press, 1978), pp. 97–98. Cf. Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons*, pp. 151–152.

and an (at least temporal) ending, the socio-religious process of getting religiously involved in hearing sermons can be analyzed into separate parts: opening up to listen, dwelling in the sermon, and actualizing faith. These three stages describe how in hearing sermons the religious receptivity of the listener develops (*opening up*), how they become part of the preaching event (*dwelling in the sermon*), and what it means to their faith in God to hear a sermon (*actualising faith*). Opening up is part of the larger liturgical sequence; dwelling in the sermon provides a powerful metaphor for the sermon, namely the sermon as ‘home;’ and actualizing faith stimulates theological reflection on the nature of faith and its emergence in the believer’s existence.<sup>6</sup>

The process of getting religiously involved and its three core stages are developed from conversations with listeners followed by a conceptualization of the empirical data. Grounded Theory provides a set of qualitative research procedures in order to arrive at a reliable theoretical rendering of empirical data.<sup>7</sup>

### Hearing Sermons as ‘Seeing’

An interesting feature of qualitative research is that it enables the researcher to focus on the *discourse* of the interview. It is possible to focus on the language and metaphors used by listeners when they themselves talk about their (mental) interaction with sermons, what hearing sermons means to them, and how they perceive or interpret a sermon.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, it appears that hearers use *visual metaphors* to indicate what happens religiously when hearing sermons. Hearing sermons is about ‘seeing’ or ‘seeing again.’

A few examples taken from incidents in the data that refer to each of the three stages—opening up, dwelling in the sermon, and actualizing faith—may suffice to demonstrate how important the language of *seeing* is for listeners:

It is great to go to church. That you are in church with the congregation. *Looking into the future*. . . Sometimes I think:

<sup>6</sup>Faith is lived out in every day life, see F. G. Immink, *Faith. A Practical Theological Reconstruction*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

<sup>7</sup>For these techniques and procedures, see Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons*, Ch. 4–5. For Grounded Theory and conceptualisation, see B. G. Glaser, ‘Conceptualization. On Theory and Theorizing Using Grounded Theory’, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 1 Retrieved August 2008 (2002):2 (URL: <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/article/view/4605/3757>).

<sup>8</sup>Discourse-analysis helps to enhance the sensitivity to linguistic patterns and latent structures of meaning, see I. Parker, *Discourse Dynamics. Critical analysis for social and individual psychology*, (London: Routledge, 1992); J. Potter, *Representing Reality. Discourse, Rhetoric and Social Construction*, (London: Sage Publications, 1996).

what kind of world do we live in? And then on a Sunday one comes together with like-minded people. . . . Then, yes, the alienation is gone for a while. (John)

In this fragment, John addresses the fact that he is happy to meet his brothers and sisters in the worship service. Opening up, the first stage of getting religiously involved, shapes the communal receptivity of the listener as indicated by John's sense of belonging. Being in church with the community of faith is not so much an escape from the 'world we live in' rather a way of 'looking into the future.' For John, becoming receptive to hearing a sermon is surrounded with the expectation of a communal event of 'looking in the future,' with which undoubtedly the future of God's Kingdom is meant. Preparing for the sermon, this listener indicates, is surrounded by the expectation that something is coming up that helps to look further than the worries of our fragmented existence.

Another incident from the conversations with listeners concerns the second stage of getting religiously involved: dwelling in the sermon. A few months ago, Kathy heard a sermon when she was in the midst of a marital crisis, and the sermon told her that

Well, that God is with you. That he is able to produce something that you cannot arrange for yourself. *You cannot even see it.* Yes, that was very special in the sermon. (Kathy)

The sermon helped Kathy to see beyond what she was able to see. Being in the world of the sermon, she felt close to God without seeing her circumstance change. Kathy articulates a paradox of listening: seeing while you're unable to see through life as it is. Is it a way of 'redemptive seeing' that creates hope and perspective? Another listener, William, also dwells in the sermon and addresses the other side of 'seeing in hearing.' The sermon directs him to his life-as-lived and helps him to recognize what goes on in his work: 'the preacher mentioned something in the sermon that applied to what was going on at work at that time. Then *one starts looking* at one's private life from the perspective of faith,' he says. The sermon does not only direct the 'eye' of the listener's mind toward the unseen, it also creates an orientation toward the here-and-now. It is here where the third stage in getting religiously involved starts. Dwelling in the sermon is followed by the actualization of faith: it is through perceiving the sermon (its kerugmatic, textual and life-world realities) and identifying with the world of the sermon that the listener's faith is developed and strengthened.

An important dimension of actualizing faith is the dialectic orientation of faith that is shaped between the here-and-now and the eschatological

promise of the Kingdom.<sup>9</sup> Talking about how her faith was actualized in hearing the sermon, Caroline says:

You know, we bump against our own limitations. That's the question he [the preacher] asked: what do we see? The hardship of life; we experience how things get worse. That feeling. And you think, like, if life is only this. But Easter is a reality. So then he puts forward the perspective of the future, and the Gospel of the resurrection. That speaks to me. Always. Then I think: this is why I come to church. *That I see that this life is not all there is, but that it leads somewhere.* That there is meaning to it. (Caroline)

The sermon points beyond the here-and-now human condition. This important eschatological orientation that sermons generate has not only been overlooked too much in sermon reception research, it also points to the essence of what hearing a sermon is about: it connects the listener with the essence of reality, a religiously qualified essence as it relates to the promise of Christ, the coming Kingdom, the realities of forgiveness and renewal. Hearing a sermon is religion: it binds the mind of the listener to the Gospel of future renewal. For Caroline, in fact, it's the only necessary reason to go to church. She reinforces that belief at another point in the interview.

Thus far, the illustrations examine conversations with listeners on the various stages of getting religiously involved in hearing sermons. The mind of the listener assesses the sermon in visual terms. The sermon pictures something for the hearer. The next question now emerges: where does this insight take us, both theologically and homiletically?

### Seeing God?

Obviously, when listeners talk about 'seeing' while hearing, they are not referring to a sensory experience but employing a metaphor that points to the mind's eye. Yet a theological pattern is beyond this visual language. Two theological distinctions are relevant here. First, the distinction between faith and seeing, biblically warranted when Jesus points out to Thomas a rule of salvation through faith: 'blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed' (John 20:29, ESV). Second, the distinction between the here-and-now and the eschatological future. The latter has been clearly attested to in

<sup>9</sup>The other two important dimensions are the duration of actualization (sequential or momentous) and the divine-human encounter (critical or affirmative). See Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons*, pp. 255–261, 265–267.

the data, when hearer's faith is shaped dialectically between the here-and-now life and the promise of the Kingdom. Yet there is an intrinsic connection between the two: we do only see the reality of faith and the essence of the life with God as in a 'mirror dimly,' as St. Paul says, 'but then face to face' (1 Cor 13:12). Seeing through faith belongs to the here-and-now order, while seeing face to face is yet to be expected as a future promise.

However, it seems that for listeners—though in metaphorical terms—this future seeing is brought into the here and now through preaching. The sermon helps them to transcend the here and now, to look into the promised future, as if it is already given. The phenomenological and experiential language that listeners use confirms this. This idea has three profound homiletic implications that I will explore in the final section of this paper. There is, however, one important theological question to be asked first: what does it mean to talk about 'seeing God?' If our preaching really participates in the eschatological knowing of God, as listeners seem to suggest, what do we believe theologically about this eschatological reality of seeing 'face to face?'<sup>10</sup> Yet an appeal to Scripture proves to be a little more complex since the apostle also states that God dwells in 'unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.' This sounds rather reticent concerning our human capacity to 'see' God's essence.

At this point I cannot spell out the intricate dogmatic issues concerning the 'beatific vision' (*visio beatifica*), the knowledge of those who are no longer pilgrims but enjoy eternal glory.<sup>11</sup> Scholastic theologians, Medieval and Reformed alike, had always been very cautious to state that the blessed are able to see God's essence.<sup>12</sup> In a very nuanced argument, in which he affirms the importance of 'sight,' Francesco Turretini appealed to the theological axiom that 'the finite is not capacious of the infinite,' due to God's incomprehensibility (*incomprehensibilitas dei*).<sup>13</sup> Regardless the ultimate position on the beatific vision, there seems little doubt that our eschatological knowledge of God will be perfect in the end, its only limitation being our human, created mind. Seeing God, in the end, may entail a very different kind

<sup>10</sup>See also other biblical passages, such as 1 John 3:2 ('we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is') and Rev. 22:4 ('They shall see his face').

<sup>11</sup>See R. A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms. Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), p. 327.

<sup>12</sup>A. Goudriaan, *Philosophische Gotteserkenntnis bei Suárez und Descartes. Im Zusammenhang mit der niederländischen reformierten Theologie und Philosophie des 17. Jahrhunderts*, (BRILL, 1999), pp. 165–166.

<sup>13</sup>F. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology. Volume 3: Eighteenth through Twentieth Topic. Transl. from the Latin by George Musgrave Giger. Edited by James T. Dennison, Jr. Original title: Institutio theologiae elencticae. Published in Geneva, 1688, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997), pp. 608–617.*

of seeing than we are used to in our limited here-and-now existence. There will, however, be a true vision of God. Seeing God as he *is*. Speaking about truth and ontology, what does this mean for our listeners who experience a kind of vision in hearing sermons?

### Picturing God in Preaching. Aspects of an Homiletic ‘Epistemology’

Is it possible to picture God, or are all our pictures mere idols that continually clash? Ultimately this questions comes down to the epistemological question: is there truth about God in our preaching?

Let’s start again with the listeners: the sermon helps me to see that there’s more to life (Caroline), the sermon helps me to look into the future (John). This is a ‘seeing’ in faith with ‘eyes of faith’ since faith entails that we believe because we cannot yet see. The sermon thus provides the listener with glimpses of a future yet unknown. At the same time, however, the fact that we do not know this future does not entail that the sermon is not capable of expressing truth about the future. In order to deal with this paradox, I appeal to a theological insight, an implication regarding the language of preaching, and a homiletic model.

First, the theological issue at stake concerns the *incomprehensibility* of God. Though our finite human minds cannot grasp the infinite fullness of the divine, we are nonetheless called to believe and to accept the testimonies of Scripture concerning God’s salvific actions in Israel and his self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. Though we cannot know him, we are yet enabled to know him. The combination of seeing and the eschatological orientation that emerges from the conversations with listeners thus points to a deeper theological issue. We are limited in our knowledge of God yet sermons provide a window that we might ‘see’ him. Whenever we talk about God, construct our theological theories, and preach the gospel, we have to acknowledge our finitude and incapability of expressing any final statements about who God is. Yet we are called to preach, to ‘predicate’ things of God, to name his works and essence. This does not only belong to the core of the preacher’s calling, listeners expect the preacher to do so. They do not come for political insights or a philosophical lecture on the human condition. They come to hear about God, even to hear ‘from’ God.<sup>14</sup> This expectation at least entails that preachers dare to name God, to talk about God, to refer to God.<sup>15</sup> Epistemologically,

<sup>14</sup>Mulligan and Allen, *Believing in Preaching*, pp. 152–168.

<sup>15</sup>On preaching as ‘Namenrede’ the founder of the Societas Homiletica, Rudolf Bohren, has offered valuable insights. Cf. J. Nierop, *Die Gestalt der Predigt im Kraftfeld des Geistes. Eine*

speaking about God and speaking about the future Kingdom are similar. We cannot perceive nor grasp their realities, yet in preaching we have to name them, to provide 'pictures' that listeners are able to see with the 'eyes of faith.' These pictures are elusive yet adequate, they are true but also limited. This has profound implications for our language of preaching.

Second, in terms of language, both concrete and metaphorical language is favored among homiletics. Metaphors are powerful linguistic devices to evoke images and pictures in the minds of listeners, they enable listeners to construct meanings. More importantly, though, metaphors do justice to the humble religious epistemology that is outlined above: our knowledge is limited yet we have to find words that do not express God's reality from one particular favored point of view. On the other hand, concrete language, as has been argued, helps listeners capture the metaphor more vividly and develop their own mental process of imagination in order to create meaning. So concrete, metaphoric language is important to do justice to the concrete life-experiences of listeners as well as our finite knowing of an infinite divine existence. In concrete and metaphoric language, the sermon builds a world in which human existence in all its concreteness and divine existence—in its incomprehensibility—can be articulated and communicated.

Two problems though need to be addressed here. First, metaphoric language is based upon analogies between the metaphor and the thing signified. There is a middle-term that has referential qualities. To name God a 'rock' compares God and rock on the point of reliability and strength. Without the reference to reliability it does not make sense to employ the metaphor 'rock' to God. In other words, metaphors need to be accompanied in sermons by referential language; interpretations, such as 'God is like a rock,' need definitions: a rock is a reliable foundation to stand firm. Next, concrete language itself cannot point beyond the here-and-now existence but creates an attentiveness on the part of the listener to the fragmented human life. Abstract language with notions as Kingdom, redemption, and salvation are needed to help the listener 'see' beyond the human condition into a future that lies ahead.

In the thesis I show that, according to hearer's reactions to sermons, sermons should have a *symbolic-linguistic balance*. This balance precisely concerns this back and forth between abstract ideas and concrete realities in order to shape a symbolic world that is both in touch with the listener in her situation and points beyond toward a Kingdom that is there but yet unseen

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*Studie zu Form und Sprache der Predigt nach Rudolf Bohrens Predigtlehre*, (Zürich / Berlin: LIT, 2008), pp. 105-124.

and to be expected.<sup>16</sup> This linguistic balance between the abstract and the concrete shapes the faith of the listener in a dialectic orientation between the here-and-now and the eschatological realities that cannot be referred to uncritically and univocally.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the homiletic model that shapes our thinking about the nature of the sermon must do justice to the three important ideas that have been presented in this paper: (1) our human identity is a fragment of its past as well of its future<sup>18</sup>; (2) in hearing sermons listeners attempt to see beyond their own lives as lived into a the world of faith that transcends the here-and-now existence; and (3) sermons must provide a fragmented language that consists of both the abstract and the concrete as well as the metaphorical and the referential within the boundaries of our finite and therefore limited knowledge of God. I would suggest the model of the tent, or biblically speaking, the *tabernacle*: a temporary home for believers in the midst of their fragmented lives, to look beyond, into God's holy realm.<sup>19</sup> As the socio-religious process of hearing sermons indicates: while listening, hearers dwell in the sermon in order to have their faith actualized.

This temporary home is limited due to our here-and-now condition; it provides a sacred place because it tries to picture glimpses of the promised future; and like a tent it is carried along through the ages, in different circumstances, social contexts, and various cultural conditions.<sup>20</sup> The sermon is a tabernacle through which the listener is transported to another world, temporal, fragmented, and limited. Yet real and in essence reflecting the Kingdom that is already present in Christ, waiting to be revealed. The sermon transports us to a narrative world in order that we may see beyond the here and now.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons*, pp. 239–240.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 261–264.

<sup>18</sup>The insight taken from Henning Luther, see section 5.

<sup>19</sup>In my thesis I suggest that the preaching provides a temporary home for believers in a secular world. The metaphor of the tabernacle fits this suggestion closely. *Ibid.*, pp. 284–289.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. O. Edwards, Jr., *A History of Preaching*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004).

<sup>21</sup>For transportation theory in studies of communication, see M. C. Green, 'Transportation Theory', in: *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*, (Blackwell, 2008); M. C. Green and T. C. Brock, 'In the Mind's Eye. Transportation-Imagery Model of Narrative Persuasion', in: M. C. Green, J. J. Strange and T. C. Brock, editors, *Narrative Impact. Social and Cognitive Foundations*, (Routledge, 2002). Transportation theory is based upon ideas concerning the psychology of reading as articulated in R. J. Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*, (Yale University Press, 1993).

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