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Four proclamatory confrontations in scribal refraction*

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Abstract

This paper offers a reflection upon the current preaching crisis in those parts of the United States church where old assumptions about preaching authority have collapsed. While preachers may have models of great confrontational authority available, in fact such authority for confrontation through preaching has largely evaporated. This paper explores new developments in OT studies that are related to canonical formulation, namely, that the biblical text as we have it is an outcome of belated editorial work whereby the text was reshaped with theological intentionality by scribes, a generative force in Judaism that transposed powerful memories into texts. Consequently, the great texts of confrontation between prophet and king, between truth and power, no longer offer dramatic confrontations but rather offer textual reflections upon remembered and perhaps constructed confrontations. The practical implication for preaching from this insight is that the preacher is not and need not be a player in confrontation as a prophet, but rather may be a scribe who keeps old texts available whereby the baptismal community may imagine its life differently. Four texts are considered wherein remembered dramatic confrontations have become textual resources.

In the discussion that follows, consideration will be given to the contested environment of preaching in the US church where traditional patterns of homiletical authority no longer pertain, thus requiring an alternative perspective that is undertaken intuitively by knowing preachers. This changed environment invites attention to an important new awareness in OT studies, namely, that the texts of confrontation between truth and power (prophet and king) in the OT have now been belatedly refracted through scribal interpretative intentionality. Consequently, what the preacher and the church now have in the bible is not a report on an encounter (an easy assumption of historical criticism), but a text behind which we cannot go. The implication is that the preacher has *the role of a scribe* who champions text and not *the role of a prophet* who participates in the confrontation. Such a perspective invites

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immense reliance on the text and removes the preacher as the point of impact in the confrontation between truth and power.

We may readily characterize preaching as *truth speaking to power*. Preaching is the difficult, daring act of enunciating a truth from outside conventionally assumed reality that accommodates none of the presuppositions of a conventional listening community. It aims to assure by an alternative, to jar by exposé, and to impel action in a new direction. It is no wonder that preaching is demanding and often dangerous work.

I

This paper will consider as a basis for our study of *truth speaking to power* four scriptural confrontations that are familiar to us because they are classic cases of 'truth to power'. In each case the 'hero', the one with whom we are intended to side in the narrative, is the one who has been authorized to utter truth that lies outside the horizon of the ones addressed.

1. The primal case of truth to power in the OT is *Moses speaking truth to Pharaoh*. Moses as a truth-teller had long preparation for his call:

- He was birthed in danger because Pharaoh, the quintessence of power, had already generically decreed his death as a baby (Exod 2:1–10; see 1:8–22);
- He was schooled as a freedom fighter (read 'terrorist') who, along with his people, resented the Egyptian administrators. He so resented them that he killed an Egyptian (Exod 2:11–12). For his moment of rage he had to flee as a fugitive, a *persona non grata* in the empire (Exod 2:13–15);
- In his status as a fugitive he is addressed by this voice from the burning bush who summons, authorizes, and dispatches him to Pharaoh (Exod 3:1–10);
- In response, Moses can think of at least five reasons not to undertake such a risky venture as truth to power:
  - He is inadequate (3:11): Who am I?;
  - His people want to know who the God is who sends (3:13);
  - Israel will not believe (4:1);
  - Moses is inadequate in speech (4:10);
  - Moses proposes the dispatch of an alternative messenger (4:13).

Moses seems to know that the mission upon which he is sent by YHWH will not succeed, or in any case is much too risky.

The protests of Moses to YHWH, however, are ineffective. The one who calls and voices truth will not be put off. Truth must be uttered. Finally,

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in chapter 5, truth is uttered to power:

> Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel:
> Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness. (5:1)

That is all! That is the truth from YHWH! Moses utters the truth of YHWH. The familiar 'Let my people go' is in fact an imperative: 'Send my people!' Through Moses, YHWH issues a directive to Pharaoh; the king of Egypt was not accustomed to hearing imperatives spoken to him, for the truth of the imperative is that Pharaoh is penultimate and accountable to YHWH.

The truth, moreover, is that the authorization of a festival to YHWH is a highly political act, for the festival is an acknowledgement of sovereignty; a response in festival is, moreover, visible obedience to YHWH as an alternative to Pharonic obedience. The truth to be told and visibly enacted is that Pharaoh is exposed as a fraudulent authority.

Over the course of the Exodus narrative, Moses has many occasions for truth-telling, truth that is finally put in this way in Exod 11:4–7:

> Moses said, 'Thus says the Lord: About midnight I will go out through Egypt. Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the livestock. Then there will be a loud cry throughout the whole land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again. But not a dog shall growl at any of the Israelites – not at people, not at animals – so that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.

The narrator, in what follows, confirms the truth of Moses' utterance:

> Then he summoned Moses and Aaron in the night, and said, 'Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord, as you said, take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone. And bring a blessing on me too!' (Exod 12:31–2)

That is the truth! The truth is that YHWH, not Pharaoh, is sovereign. YHWH is glorified and the power of Pharaoh is dissolved. As a consequence and by-product, Israel is emancipated. That is the truth. It is the truth of YHWH; it is, moreover, the disastrous truth of Pharaoh. Moses, frightened, mumbling Moses, is engaged in proclamation that changed history and founded the missional people of God in the world.

2. A second familiar case study of *truth to power*, a proclamation that jars and invites, is the encounter of Nathan with David in 2 Sam 12. The narrative of

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David's success is well known. From his youth David was a privileged child who quickly passed over his seven older siblings in favor (1 Sam 16:1–13). Even as a little boy, a giant-killing little boy, he was an anointed king and messiah. The story of his rise to power that is given to us in the books of Samuel is an amazing saga. The women adored him (1 Sam 18:7), the men trusted and admired him, a man's man, a soldier, a chief, an intimidator (2 Sam 23:13–17). Everything happens for his benefit and advancement. Very few people ever are able to say 'no' to him, and one who does say 'no' promptly dies (see 1 Sam 25:37–8). Indeed, David is the beneficiary of many convenient deaths, so many that he is endlessly under suspicion for murder (2 Sam 1:15–16; 3:28–37; 4:11). He himself asserts his innocence in his eager self-announcement to Abigail:

> David said to Abigail, 'Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who sent you to meet me today! Blessed be your good sense, and blessed be you, who have kept me today from bloodguilt and from avenging myself by my own hand!' (1 Sam 25:32–3)

That assertion of innocence did not persuade everyone, however, as Shimei calls him by another name:

> Shimei shouted while he cursed, 'Out! Out! Murderer! Scoundrel! The Lord has avenged on all of you the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the Lord has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See, disaster has overtaken you; for you are a man of blood.' (2 Sam 16:7–8)

In any case, David arrived in power with a long winning streak, successful and innocent (2 Sam 2:4; 5:1–5). He was seven years king in Hebron, then promoted to Jerusalem, and in Jerusalem, settled, safe, prosperous, and then bored. He was so bored that he needed diversion. He spotted Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:2–3). She, like everyone before her, did not resist him, and the rest, as they say, is history. What follows is a narrative of cover-up. And then an act of murder. It is all in the interest of protecting this king who is above the Torah, who has no restraints, who will have what he wants, who bends the whole world to his whim. That's power!

Enter truth! Enter Nathan, the prophet on the payroll of the king, who back in chapter 7 had given an oracle of divine assurance to David. In that oracle the creator of heaven and earth signs a blank check to this ruthless, self-indulgent king. That had been an easy truth to speak to power:

> But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall

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> be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever. (2 Sam 7:15–16)

But now, in the wake of 2 Sam 11 and Bathsheba and Uriah, this same truth-teller has a more demanding, dangerous assignment. He must still tell the truth, the truth from the same God to the same king. It turns out, however, that the God of the wondrous *royal oracle* of 2 Sam 7 is also the God of the *sturdy Torah* who must communicate this uncompromising truth to this king who had accepted no restraints. It is the truth that there is an intransigent restraint in YHWH's Torah that cannot be violated.

This truth-telling assignment given to Nathan is daring and dangerous: the challenge is to announce restraint to an unrestrainable, unrestrained, spoiled, self-indulgent king! The prophet Nathan wisely resorts to a figure of speech, a parable. Nathan employs an artistic euphemism to soften the truth, hoping that the king will not too readily notice or understand what is now to be said as truth.

The parable does its effective, dangerous work (2 Sam 12:1–4). Ever since that moment, moreover, preachers who must speak *truth to power* have been employing euphemisms and figures of speech and other rhetorical strategies that we call 'illustrations'. Nathan's chosen artistic articulation concerns a rich man with many sheep and a poor man with one sheep. David gets the point immediately and expresses his indignation, unwittingly condemning his own royal action:

> Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.' (2 Sam 12:5–6)

The ploy of Nathan works. Nathan the truth-teller, however, is not finished. He still has to draw his point directly to the king. In English, Nathan has to say four dangerous words to David: 'You are the man!' In Hebrew, Nathan can get by with only two: ''*attah ha'ish*'. But two words or four words, these are dangerous words whereby the indignant king is quickly moved from recipient of a parable to the main character in the transaction, the one who is condemned out of his own mouth. Our interest, however, is not in King David, but in Nathan the truth-teller. What an act of courage and what a risk! At stake in this two-word interpretative act is Nathan's office, his prestige, his future, surely his well-connected wealth. He must speak that truth! Nathan must deconstruct royal self-regard in order to assert that before the intransigence of the Torah the king stands exposed and equal to every

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other Israelite, nothing special, no exception. It has been a very long time since anyone had risked telling David that he was nobody special!

It may well be that that is all that Nathan said, all that he needed to say, all that he dared to say. The critics have concluded that after the narrative in its artistic coolness there comes the moral intensity of the Deuteronomist to make things specific so that nobody will misunderstand the truth that has been uttered and the power that has consequently been deconstructed:

> Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the Lord: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.' (2 Sam 12:9–12)

In the hands of the Deuteronomists, the artistic parable of Nathan becomes a prosaic speech of judgment that places the king under severe and inescapable penalty. The royal house will be troubled and humiliated; this house of privilege will become the house of embarrassment, and that right soon.

It belongs to David's magnificence that in this dangerous moment he responds to Nathan's parable as an obedient son of the Torah. He utters six words of acknowledgement: 'I have sinned against the Lord', only two in Hebrew, '*ḥaʾyaʾti l YHWH*' (2 Sam 12:13). The truth has prevailed and David in his power has repented. This is exactly the way such encounters are supposed to work. What a relief, because Nathan had no assurance that his confrontation with the king would work so well. Very often power does not yield to truth. This time, in any case, it did; Nathan had risked his life and future for the sake of Torah truth, and power had embraced that truth.

3. The third well-known case of truth to power is in 1 Kgs 21, the tale of 'Naboth's vineyard'. It is interesting that we name the narrative so, for Naboth speaks only once, a minor truth-teller to the king:

> But Naboth said to Ahab, 'The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.' (1 Kgs 21:3)

That is all Naboth is ever permitted to speak. His utterance, however, is a remarkable act of resistance to the king, whereby the acquisitive will of the king is thwarted by old tribal notions of patrimony. Our interest, however,

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is in the king, Ahab. He is, after his father, the second king of the dynasty of Omri. The dynasty of Omri lasted 40 years or so and amassed great wealth and power. It also attracted to itself narratives that seemed to deconstruct its claims to legitimate power. The dynasty of Omri receives attention in the bible, however, only because it is the public arena for the stunning performances of the prophets Elijah, Elisha, and Micaiah. The occasion for these awesome truth-tellers is that the Omri dynasty, according to this version, is dead set against the tradition of Torah. These Omride kings are practitioners of Baalism, certainly a heterodox religion, a religion that bespeaks social policies of aggrandizement, acquisitiveness, and exploitation.

In biblical focus, everything turns on this Ahab, son of Omri. He attracts great narrative attention and is the focus of power to which all of this prophetic truth must be addressed. The narrative of 1 Kgs 21 concerns a modest real estate deal. It is amazing how great enterprises of state often turn on small, inconspicuous transactions that of themselves amount to nothing, as in the cases of Watergate, Whitewater, and Enron. In this case, Ahab wants a tract of land owned by Naboth for his vegetable garden (2 Kgs 21:2). The king offers to pay for the property because he assumes, in good Baalistic fashion, that everything and everyone is a purchasable commodity. The king is stunned when Naboth, a powerless Israelite, refuses the request of the king. Ahab is defeated by the resistance of Naboth; he went home and to bed; he would not eat and he sulked (1 Kgs 21:4).

The story would end there except for Ahab's wife, the queen Jezebel. She is from Tyre, not native born, not Israelite, not child of Torah, not subject to old tribal restraints. She knows how to move in the world – and she moves. She scolds her husband and makes a promise to him:

> His wife Jezebel said to him, 'Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.' (1 Kgs 21:7)

Jezebel orchestrates a judicial scenario against the innocent Naboth, frames him, and gets him stoned by the indignant citizens as an enemy of God and state (1 Kgs 21:8–14). The mastery of public opinion is indispensable for the practice of ruthless power. As the narrative goes, all's well that ends well for the powerful royal couple:

> As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, 'Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead.' As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set

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> out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it. (1 Kgs 21:15–16)

End of story! No doubt had Naboth had a clue about the rapacious quality of royal power, he would have sold his land promptly to the crown at the first offered price; but he was innocent, and before real power the innocent have short lives.

The story should have ended there. Land acquired, crown vindicated, case closed! Except that in the truth-telling horizon of the OT, only now does the narrative really begin. Only now does the key character, Elijah, appear on the scene. Elijah gets only a few narratives in Israel, but when on stage he utterly dominates. He has been introduced in 1 Kgs 17:1–7 as a dangerous character who ate no royal junk food but lived on the supplies flown in by bird and what he could drink from the brook. He lived completely outside the world of royal management and the flow of consumer goods. Even before our narrative concerning Naboth, with immense pastoral passion Elijah had enacted God's truth of life against the power of death when he raised the dead boy, son of the widow of Sidon, to new life (1 Kgs 17:17–24).

In our particular narrative Elijah does not exhibit much of what we might call 'pastoral presence'. He is dispatched by YHWH, the ultimate truth-teller, to meet the king:

> Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules in Samaria; he is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. You shall say to him, 'Thus says the Lord; Have you killed, and also taken possession?' You shall say to him, 'Thus says the Lord: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood.' (1 Kgs 21:18–19)

The God of Israel had read the scholarly literature about 'prophetic lawsuits' and utters a perfect 'prophetic lawsuit' with appropriate *indictment* and corresponding *sentence*. This utterance is voiced in the divine dispatch on the lips of YHWH. Elijah, obedient to truth, swoops down on the king, who calls him an 'enemy' (v. 20). Elijah is devoted to the urgency of truth-telling and so minces no words with the king. He delivers an incredibly harsh oracle of punishment against Ahab and against the entire dynasty:

Indictment:

> Ahab said to Elijah, 'Have you found me, O my enemy?' He answered, 'I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord.' (1 Kgs 21:20)

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Threat against the dynasty:

> I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel; and I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin. (1 Kgs 21:21–2)

Threat against Jezebel the instigator:

> Also concerning Jezebel the Lord said, 'The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel.' (1 Kgs 21:23)

More threat against the house of Ahab:

> Anyone belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat; and anyone of his who dies in the open country the birds of the air shall eat. (1 Kgs 21:24)

The truth told here against royal power is breathtaking. It is so sweeping as to leave no exception to death:

> . . . every male, bond or free
> . . . anyone belonging to Ahab
> who dies in the city . . . dogs
> who dies in the country . . . birds.

The severity of this judgment seems disproportionate for seizing one vegetable garden and killing one small farmer.

But of course Naboth is only an instant in a general policy of ruthless royal acquisitiveness, the kind of acquisitiveness that the God of Torah will not tolerate. Elijah is fearless and pulls no punches before the king. We should not, however, gloss over the risk of truth-telling. Elijah does not blink at killing; but the truth must be told.

So truth is told. Astonishingly, Ahab responds:

> When Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth over his bare flesh; he fasted, lay in the sackcloth, and went about dejectedly. (1 Kgs 21:27)

Critics judge that this note of repentance on the part of Ahab is not authentic, but for the sake of coherence chronology: Ahab in the narrative could not die yet. It turns out in the full telling, as we discover belatedly, that Elijah's word is true. Ahab dies in chapter 22 (see vv. 34–40); it takes longer for Jezebel, who dies ignominiously in 2 Kgs 9:33–7:

> He said, 'Throw her down.' So they threw her down; some of her blood spattered on the wall and on the horses, which trampled on her. Then he went in and ate and drank; he said, 'See to that cursed woman and bury

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> her; for she is a king's daughter.' But when they went to bury her, they found no more of her than the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands. When they came back and told him, he said, 'This is the word of the Lord, which he spoke by his servant Elijah the Tishbite, "In the territory of Jezreel the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel; the corpse of Jezebel shall be like dung on the field in the territory of Jezreel, so that no one can say, This is Jezebel."'

It is the truth. The truth given by Elijah. And that truth – rooted in YHWH, concretized in Naboth – will not be mocked by power.

4. The fourth case I cite is less well known among us. It concerns Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 4. He is the king of Babylon, and in fact, even more than Pharaoh before him, he is the quintessential cipher in the OT for all intransigent, acquisitive power. Nebuchadnezzar, it is reported, had had a terrible nightmare, the kind one has when power sits uneasy in anxiety. He is king of everything but, we are told, his entire research and development cadre now fails him. None can interpret the dream, because dreams are secret; they are night-time messages from God that lie outside the purview of technocrats.

In a last desperate maneuver to learn the truth of his nightmare about power, Nebuchadnezzar summons Daniel, who is known to be a peculiarly endowed Jew with incomparable hermeneutical capacities. Nebuchadnezzar renarrates his dream to Daniel, a remarkable practice for power in a position of deference before truth. Nebuchadnezzar, so the story goes, has confidence in this Jew with peculiar gifts of wisdom:

> You are able, however, for you are endowed with a spirit of the holy gods. (Dan 4:18)

Daniel hears the dream and immediately knows its meaning. Daniel is, however, 'severely distressed' (v. 19). The news he must enunciate for Nebuchadnezzar is not good, and Daniel trembles at the risk that his interpretation will entail for him. The king reassures him but Daniel parries:

> The king said, 'Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or the interpretation terrify you.' Belteshazzar answered, 'My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you, and its interpretation for your enemies!' (Dan 4:19)

In any case, Daniel finally tells the king the meaning of his dream. The dream anticipates that Nebuchadnezzar will be severely demoted from his glorious power, driven away from human society to dwell among wild animals. This sorry, humiliating condition of the king will last, so says Daniel,

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> until you have learned that the Most High has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals and gives it to whom he will. (Dan 4:20)

Indeed, is that not the lesson that truth must always speak to power? The word of the dream beyond royal control is that power invested in human agents is endlessly, intractably penultimate. Daniel goes so far as to suggest to the king action that he might take, even though the king has not asked him for advice:

> Therefore, O king, may my counsel be acceptable to you: atone for your sins with righteousness, and your iniquities with mercy to the oppressed, so that your prosperity may be prolonged. (Dan 4:27)

The advice of Daniel, so quintessentially Jewish in tone and substance, goes unanswered by Nebuchadnezzar and, as far as we know, unheeded.

The reader is not surprised to find that Daniel, the truth-teller, is vindicated. The dream comes to reality as Daniel had said; the power of Nebuchadnezzar is deconstructed as Daniel anticipated. Nebuchadnezzar becomes like an animal who eats grass, grows long hair, and has nails like claws. He is utterly ungroomed and his being ungroomed is a sign of his new status of powerlessness. He is, by the hidden sovereignty of God, uncreated, now less than the creature God had made him. All this Daniel had anticipated and announced to the waning king.

The astonishing feature of this narrative is that it does not end in radical deconstruction of power, as we might have expected. The narrative continues until it can report restoration of the king. Nebuchadnezzar, we are told, recovered his sanity. In his sanity, moreover, he does the most sane thing imaginable. He sings doxology to the Most High, a public, lyrical act of ceding ultimate authority out beyond himself to the creator God:

> When that period was over, I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me.
> I blessed the Most High,
> and praised and honored the one who lives forever.
> For his sovereignty is an everlasting sovereignty,
> and his kingdom endures from generation to generation.
> All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,
> and he does what he wills with the host of heaven
> and the inhabitants of the earth.
> There is no one who can stay his hand or say to him,
> 'What are you doing? (Dan 4:34–5)

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With that defining concession, the narrative comes full circle. Nebuchadnezzar is re-established, 'and still more greatness was added to me' (v. 36):

> Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven,
> for all his works are truth, and his ways are justice;
> and he is able to bring low those who walk in pride. (Dan 4:37)

Only now, having been addressed by truth, is this man of power remade so that his power is marked now by truth, justice, and lowliness. This practice of power for Nebuchadnezzar is one that was not possible before doxology. The doxology the king now sings was not possible until he had heard the truth. It was not possible as long as Nebuchadnezzar imagined his power to be ultimate. He now knows that his power is decisively penultimate. The dream of the night was a truth that subverted the illusion of the day.

II

These four cases of *truth to power* are typical and representative. All of us, moreover, could cite other cases in scripture and beyond scripture, notably Jesus before Pilate – or Pilate before Jesus. It would be enough for one to say to courageous preachers, 'Go and do likewise'. It would be enough to say that and stop.

Except that I have cited these four characteristic cases precisely because I have wanted to consider the challenge of *truth to power* and the deep problematic of such a formula poses for contemporary preaching. In the end, I would not want to detract from that long-standing crisp model of preaching; at the same time, however, I want to underscore the problematic. *Truth to power* is a simple – simplistic? – model that almost no credible contemporary preacher can readily embrace, unless one is tenured, or at the end of a career, or has a reliable patron. Those who preside over institutions with programs, budgets, and members filled with anxiety are not likely to practice, with any simplicity, the notion of *truth to power*. Perhaps most contemporary preachers are too well kept and too cowardly. We are, in our present circumstance,

- short of being a fugitive like Moses,
- short of being a raven-fed figure like Elijah,
- short of being on the royal payroll like Nathan,
- short of being clairvoyant like Daniel.

No contemporary preacher is likely to speak truth to power like Moses, so clearly and so effectively that the utterance will dismantle an empire and free slaves. No contemporary preacher likely will crash the palace like Nathan

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to tell an indicting parable to the king. No contemporary preacher, surely, will like Elijah be the king's enemy and announce the death penalty. No contemporary preacher like Daniel is likely to interpret royal dreams.

Beyond those brute realities, however, there are other reasons why *truth to power* is problematic – beyond our cowardice, our ineffectiveness, or our inclination to accommodate. I submit that the problematic we face in preaching is that any simplistic notion of truth and power is now situated in a postmodern world where such easy assumptions of authority are profoundly precarious.

I do not want to deny that there are occasional dramatic moments when truth can be spoken directly to power, and must be spoken directly to power. I believe, however, that this model, on the whole, is not possible in our society and is certainly not possible in local congregations where one is cast as preacher, but also as administrator charged with maintenance.

Consider *power*, clear enough in the four cases cited. Power, however, is less clear in a complex world of interlocking systems. In any case, the fact is that those who have power among us sense relative powerlessness about themselves. Before being addressed as power, moreover, the pastoral task is empowerment, that is, the readiness to accept and affirm what power there is or could be, had we courage. That task of empowerment in pastoral scope requires a different perspective from any flat critique of power. In fact it is the case in a postmodern world that power is endlessly subtle, complex, and elusive. Those who sit in the midst of contemporary preaching, moreover, characteristically are not carriers of immense power.

Conversely, consider *truth*. There was a time when the church was a primal authority and the authority of the preacher was immense. There was a time when the preacher was the best-educated 'man' in town. There was a time when issues were less complex; but not now. Now it is the case that truth has become democratized and secularized, and held in many quarters. Every preacher knows, moreover, to pay attention when drawing near to the specialized learnings that are present among others in the congregation.

- If by truth we mean simply the claim of the Lordship of God – Father, Son and Spirit – that can be proclaimed readily, simply, and directly. But of course truth never stops there – if we focus on the big dramatic moments of confrontation and think about the great heroes through the history of the church who have confronted power, then we can speak simply enough; but such occasions do not come often to most of us.
- If we think truth is peculiarly allied with pain – as in our defining Friday of the cross – not many of us have suffered inordinately and, in any case, we have no monopoly on such suffering.

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– If one means that truth of the gospel voiced to have real impact upon the specific needs and problems of the world, then utterance requires exposition with full recognition of the complexities whereby God's suffering love touches the world in transformative ways.

Thus in a postmodern world both *truth* and *power* are complex and elusive; contemporary preachers are not permitted an easy assumption of our own certitude or importance. There is an endless temptation, when reading Exod 5, for the preacher to cast one's self as Moses and address all the Pharaohs when we ourselves are implicated in the sins of acquisitive power. There is a readiness to know the sin of royal power and play the part of Nathan or of Elijah, and every contemporary preacher probably would like to be Daniel, urging 'mercy to the oppressed' in the ear of the haughty Babylonian king who is fated to eat grass. Such a stance is impossible, however, except for the very young and the very innocent, or the tenured and the very foolish.

III

Thus my review of the *four cases* and my statement of their inescapable *problematic* for preachers bring me to my primary reflection. It does not follow, I suggest, because these texts of confrontation and many like them are problematic for our rendering, that they are useless or that we need to find more palatable texts. Rather, I want to insist that these confrontational scenarios are *texts* and need to be taken as such. This of course is obvious; but notice that our common assumptions for texts are propelled by historical criticism. We know best how to go *behind the text to the drama of real life* that we can then re-enact. What we have in the bible, however, is not real-life historical drama. And if not real-life historical drama, then not drama to be re-enacted by us. If we go behind the text to the interaction, we sense ourselves both obligated and empowered to re-enact confrontations reported in the text as contemporary confrontations. But we do not in fact have a report on such encounters. What we have, rather, is a *text* that stands some distance removed from whatever historical encounter might have happened, a text that has its own interpretative offer that is surely remote from actual encounter. That we have a *text* means:

- that it stands some distance from the reality of raw facticity;
- that it is a stylized, artistic act of imagination;
- that that act of imagination has transposed whatever may have been of history into artistry, an artistry that may be instructive but nonetheless art;
- that this artistic transposition from factual happening (to which we have no access) to text (which we have in our hands) is accomplished by

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the imaginative and intentional work of real, self-conscious agents who intentionally 'make text'.

While we do not know some things about the formation of the text as given to us, we do know (or at least think we know) that the forming of artistic imagination into narrative text happened in the Persian and Hellenistic periods of ancient Judaism. This period of text-making was a time of no more kings in Israel and very few prophets. What remained after the withdrawal of kings and prophets that became a driving force for Judaism were scribes.[1] Thus, as in my title, what we have in the text are 'remembered confrontations' (between power [kings] and truth [prophets]) given us through 'scribal refraction', that is, through an intentional, self-conscious, interpretative editorial process that came later and eventuated in canonical text. That process of scribal refraction, now front and center in scholarly work, was not at all on the horizon of our long-established historical critical work that sought to get behind text to lived reality; the process of scribal refraction, against more established assumptions of historical criticism, is a recently recovered scholarly interest. I suggest that scribal refraction (called by Brevard Childs 'canonization', by Carroll 'ideology') is not only important in understanding the text, but is also an important clue for contemporary preaching if the simple model of *truth to power* can no longer be defining for us.

I want then to speak a good word for scribes as the ones who have mediated for us canonical text. Our stereotype, from NT polemics, is to group the scribes with 'Pharisees and hypocrites' (Matt 15:1–7; 23:13, 15, 25, 27, 29) in a negative stereotype. In fact, the scribes are the schoolmen and the book men who gathered old traditions and memories and preserved them in text form. They are the scroll-makers who stand at the head of the canonizing process.[2] Among the best-known of these is *Baruch*, who created some form of the book of Jeremiah, and his brother Seraiah, who also served Jeremiah by writing (Jer 36:4; 51:59–64).[3] After them, we may focus especially on *Ezra* the scribe, the primal figure in creating Judaism. It was Ezra who formed Judaism into a community of text practice, whereby

[1] See Philip R. Davies, *The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Library of Ancient Israel; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998) and John L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

[2] See Walter Brueggemann, 'On Scroll-Making in Ancient Jerusalem', *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 33.1 (Spring 2003) 5–11.

[3] See James Muilenburg, 'Baruch the Scribe', in *Proclamation and Presence*, ed. John I. Durham and J. Roy Porter (London: SCM Press, 1970), pp. 215–38, and, more critically, Andrew J. Dearman, 'My Servants the Scribes: Composition and Context in Jeremiah 36', *JBL* 109 (1990), pp. 403–21.

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the lively, generative work of interpretation became definitional for Judaism, the Judaism of which Jesus is surely an heir. In Neh 8, in a dramatic meeting, it is reported that Ezra presided over an assemblage of 'men and women and those who could understand' (vv. 1–2). There he read the Torah to the community. He

> helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. (vv. 7–8)

This was a gathering of people of Jewish descent who had been tossed about by the vagaries of historical circumstance and who had largely forgotten their theological identity in the rootage of Moses. What Ezra did was to *re-text* this community, to turn the imagination and therefore the practice of the community back to its most elemental assurances and claims. From that dramatic effort, moreover, came canon, the community of Judaism, and the ongoing rabbinic teaching through which Judaism marks and sustains its identity.

Mutatis mutandis, my bid is that contemporary preaching in the postmodern US addresses folks of Christian descent who have been tossed about by the vagaries of historical circumstance and who have largely forgotten rootage in Moses and in Jesus and the ongoing teaching tradition. The task, in such a critical context, is to *re-text* this community, to turn the imagination and the practice of the community of the baptized back to its most elemental assurances and claims. I suggest nothing less than the *re-imagining* and *re-contextualizing* of the primal congregational venue for preaching, worship and teaching as an arena for *re-texting* a community that has largely forfeited its text and so its identity.

The import of such an interpretative maneuver is to give up an attempt to replicate or re-enact the work of thirteenth-century Moses or of tenth-century Nathan or of eighth-century Elijah or of fifth- (or second-)century Daniel; instead the task is to take on the work of a belated scribe who does not conduct the direct encounter of truth and power, but who keeps alive, available, and credible in belated practice textual newness and imagination of earlier confrontations to which we have no direct access. The defining mark of the text, in all its parts, is not the boldness of the prophetic character. It is, rather, that the key character in every such narrative encounter is YHWH, the one who promises, delivers, and commands, the one who endlessly summons people away from life without promise, without deliverance, without commands, into a world that the text provides and proposes as

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normative. This key character is not enacted by the preacher; rather, God's own self is known and available through the *re-performance* of the text by the scribe.

This task of *re-texting* requires the scribal preacher to be a text-man or a text-woman, to engage in study, to trust the text and be led by the text, to have confidence that the text, in all its vagaries and complexities, in all its characteristic and confounding cadences, merits our primal attention as a word of life.[4] This perspective requires that we submit our modernist rationalistic assumptions to the text and, even when the text sounds in violence and all of its unbearable harshness or other objectionable cadences, still to assume that engagement with this text is a primal engagement out of which comes missional energy, imagination, and identity. To be sure, such engagement with the text does not consist in blind acceptance of the text. Such engagement evokes disputation and protest as well as assent. Nonetheless, such engagement makes possible a new field of courage and freedom.

Beyond attentiveness to the text, however, this mode of preaching requires attentiveness to the listening congregation in a particular way. In part the congregation already knows this text; but in part the congregation *is textless*, having been impacted by what George Lindbeck calls 'expressive, experiential' perspective that believes that one can live out of one's autonomous experience without any text.[5] Or the congregation assembles, bringing with it the *weak, thin text* of technological, therapeutic military consumerism that is an odd mix of moralism, market ideology, self-congratulations, and anxiety. That is, the scribe does not do text work in a vacuum, but (a) *in the face of resistance* that rejects any text, or (b) *in the face of thin text* that claims excessive and disproportionate authority, or (c) in the presence of those who are inclined to this text, but who have *little clue about the text* or how to hear the text so that it could function as identity-giving.

IV

Thus I consider the scribal, textual refraction of the four proclamatory encounters I have mentioned. The matter of *truth to power* is indeed present in each of these texts in a quite direct way. But when considered in scribal refraction, these offers of 'truth and power' are playfully open and not

[4] For good reason, James A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 100, calls for the church 'to produce more "wisemen" [read "scribes"] and fewer "prophets"'.

[5] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 31–2 and *passim*.

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as unambiguous as our usual confrontational re-enactment might assume. Thus I attend to a distinction that is characteristically made by belated scribes between what is *in the text* and what is *our engagement with the text*.

1. *Truth to power* concerning *Moses to Pharaoh* in *Exod* 5. The task in scribal refraction is to let the text be a resource for re-texting the imagination, energy, and identity of the community through the re-texting enterprise. The transaction of the text is simple:

YHWH commands
Moses confronts
Pharaoh resists
YHWH prevails.

The narrative process maps the world of faith – the world of social power, the world of economic tension between labor and capital, between haves and have-nots, between power and powerlessness. It may also map familiar power grids in families and churches and seminaries. It may invite us to play all roles and every role and many roles in the narrative drama. We may listen as the one addressed or as the one sent. We may imagine ourselves as resistant to address or we may assume a new role for Pharaoh, willing to be addressed and repent, capable of imagining the Exodus narrative with a different outcome. Note well, in any case, scribal refraction is not excessively 'hot' about relevance. While the text, in our scribal imagination, may send out lines of connection and allude to contemporaneity, for the most part the interpretation stays within the text and lets the listening congregation stay within the text without being scolded or shamed or threatened.

Inside the text, *those in textless autonomy* may imagine that they live in an unaddressed world, not thick with tradition, and now this text is planted thickly in imagination for future reference. Those who come with the text of military consumerism may sense that there is a countertext so that choices are possible between texts. And those who have 'the Jesus text' in a vacuum may notice that Jesus, in all his confrontations before Caesar and Pilate, exposes old, established powers. All those engaged in 'text time', (a) the *textless*, (b) the *already texted*, and (c) those with *alternative texts*, are drawn to see that the confrontation between truth and power has within it a third factor, holiness beyond our usual truth and beyond our usual power and, perhaps, endlessly unsettled. Indeed, it is in the nature of key character in these texts to unsettle and to be unsettled.

2. The situation is the same, but somewhat different, in our second case, that of David and Nathan. Nathan is the voice who speaks both the guilt before YHWH and the favor of YHWH that surely hovered over David. Unlike

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Pharaoh, David is a child of the Torah. He knows about the ten prohibitions from Sinai. Until the matter is uttered as a prophetic speech of judgment, however, David does not need to deal with the problem and perhaps cannot. Thus Nathan is the voicing of the relentless, unvoiced agony of a failed child of Torah. Nathan did not say something new to David. He said what was known and waiting to be voiced yet again. That is why David caught the parable so quickly; indeed, that is why David answered so quickly חטאתי ליהוה, 'I have sinned against YHWH'. Nathan is a harsh judge; in sfact, however, Nathan's work is to relieve David, to unburden him albeit in costly ways, in order that he may try again in his thin, failed life to become who he is. Nathan's speech of judgment makes available to David the givenness of Torah from which David has momentarily imagined himself immune. Thus the Deuteronomist has Nathan speak of 'take his wife' and 'killing', voicing a given that is not available to people in autonomous reason and that is not available in the text of consumer indulgence (1 Sam 12:9). The congregation is invited to ponder the deep voicing of failure, the intransigent givenness of Torah, the costly way of forgiveness, and the wonder of a post-forgiveness life beginning again, 'born from above' (see John 3:7).

3. The third case, that of Elijah and Ahab, is severe and without pastoral nuance. We have seen that Pharaoh is *an outsider* to the Israelite tradition and does not know YHWH until very late. We have seen that David is *an insider* to the Israelite tradition and knows what is required. Ahab, in contrast to both Pharaoh and David, is an *ambiguous figure*. He should have known as an insider. Perhaps he did know and that is why he himself did not press the point of dispute with Naboth (1 Kgs 21:4). He had, however, lived a long time outside the tradition, an outside that was connected with Jezebel. In contrast to Ahab, Jezebel had no compunction in her ruthlessness and did not understand Israelite covenantalism. Perhaps Ahab admired Jezebel's freedom and ruthlessness. Perhaps he yearned to be as free from ambiguity as was she. Perhaps he feared her and wished he had the courage to resist her. Perhaps Ahab was *double-minded* and that is why he pouted and turned his head to the wall and would not eat, unable and unwilling to decide between a Torah tradition that he was supposed to honor and an acquisitive alternative that suited him better (1 Kgs 21:4). Ahab could not decide.

I imagine that any day that we consider this text, Ahab will not be the only one in the room who does not want to decide. The congregation will be filled with people who cannot decide, whose energy is sapped by ambivalence. Of course it is no better for those who have already decided, like Jezebel, for such decisions bring the power of death, not suddenly but inescapably. Ten chapters are required for Jezebel to die (2 Kgs 9:30–7). Indeed it takes a long time to die if we stand in resistance to the will of the true God, a long

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time but nonetheless sure. Ahab in any case repents. He repents in the face of harshness:

> When Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth over his bare flesh; he fasted, lay in the sackcloth, and went about dejectedly. (1 Kgs 21:27)

Ahab did the proper acts of repentance; he was, however, not a free man because he was still 'dejected' (1 Kgs 21:27). He was still depressed because the popular, self-indulgent alternative of Jezebel still attracted him.

We may read the narrative of Naboth's vineyard in relation to whatever it is that we desire but to which we are not entitled. The very phrase 'Naboth's vineyard' invites a thought against self-indulgent acquisitiveness that coincides with Jezebel's relentless entitlement. Astonishingly, the phrase 'Naboth's Vineyard' is the title of a study in the US State Department written by the Associate Secretary of State Sumner Welles under the administration of Franklin Roosevelt.[6] Welles used the phrase to describe his review of US policy in Central America, for the US has been Ahab (or Jezebel) to Naboth's vineyard in Central America. We live in a world and a system of endless strategies for taking the vineyard of the little guy, not unlike the one lamb in Naboth's vineyard. Naboth, Nathan – our narrative imagination is peopled by phalanxes of old characters who keep turning up to expose our entitlements that are, in fact, seizures, rapacious seizures that have the smell of death about them.

4. The fourth case, Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel, is something of a fantasy not so close to reality. The plot nonetheless engages us because it suggests that unlimited power, uncurbed entitlement, and the absolutizing of one's personal claims leads not only to loss, but to insanity. Rapacious self-aggrandizement will produce craziness! The narrative poses the question about how the practice of power in the world may be a cause of craziness and a practice of madness, a germane point given the unilateral propensity of 'the last superpower'! This narrative of craziness nonetheless holds out promise. Unlike the accounts of Pharaoh and Ahab, there is here a chance of rehabilitation and restoration to power. The move from self-destructive insanity to restoration and doxological sanity is marked by two moves.

First, Nebuchadnezzar is capable of doxology, capable of publicly ceding ultimate authority beyond himself to God Most High. The very act of doxology, if properly understood, is the surrender of the self to the one

[6] Sumner Welles, *Naboth's Vineyard: The Dominican Republic, 1844–1924* (New York: ARNO Press, 1972).

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praised.[7] But second, the trigger for this move of Nebuchadnezzar to sanity via doxology is the introduction of the primal Jewish notion of obedience into the narrative:

> Therefore, O king, may my counsel be acceptable to you: atone for your sins with righteousness, and your iniquities with mercy to the oppressed, so that your prosperity may be prolonged. (Dan 4:27)

This urging to power in Daniel's voice of truth is deeply Jewish. It appeals to the deepest claims of Torah and invites Nebuchadnezzar to imitate YHWH, the God of mercy and righteousness. This single imperative that destabilizes failed power is rooted in Moses. It finds resilient echo in Jesus, child of the Torah:

> Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: *justice and mercy and faith*. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. (Matt 23:23)

Doxology is an outgrowth of justice. Mercy lives on the wings of doxology whereby all things are made new, when power concedes that

> the Most High has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals and gives it to whom he will. (Dan 4:32)

Scribes are modest people. They do not claim too much for themselves. They do not push people into corners, nor do they issue strong imperatives. They tell the truth and stage 'text time' for engagement with that truth.

- They invite people who live *without texts* to try a text that has holy presence at its center, presence that shapes the world toward life.
- They invite people with *thin texts* to a thickness that cannot be had apart from the God who governs.
- They invite people already *in this text* to ponder more closely, to notice nuance and cadence and the lines sent out to contemporary life.

The text is a voice of truth, albeit elusive. When 'text time' is well managed, moreover, this text reaches to those with power. There is truth to power in such interpretative transactions, but it is not the advocacy of the preacher.[8]

[7] See Walter Brueggemann, 'Praise and the Psalms: A Politics of Glad "Abandonment"', in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 112–32.

[8] See Walter Brueggemann, 'The Preacher, The Text, and the People', *Theology Today* 47 (1990), pp. 237–47.

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The preacher is cast more in a role not unlike that of a pastoral therapist. The preacher-therapist seeks to let power of illusion and repression be addressed by old, deep texts that swirl around us. The text is not the possession of the preacher but it lives in, with, and under the memory of the community. The preacher gets out of the center of the confrontation, *trusts the text* to have its own say, powered by the Spirit and not dependent on us, *trusts the listening congregation* to make the connections it is able to make. While engaging in such trust toward text and toward congregation, the scribe finds himself/herself also drawn into the deep place of *truthful power* and *powerful truth*, a deep place that permits even text-championing scribes to re-imagine and re-describe. Such an act of re-imagining may issue in repentance, perhaps a turn that makes all things new.

I finish with two concluding comments:

1. Jesus taught his disciples about the kingdom by means of parables, that is, not by confrontation (Matt 13:40–50). And then he said to them, 'Have you understood all of this'? (v. 51). Jesus clearly is a teacher and he is asking for feedback. And the disciples answer, 'Yes'.

> And he said to them, 'Therefore, every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.' When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place. (Matt 13:52–3)

It cannot be unimportant that Jesus instructs his disciples by reference to scribes. Perhaps he invites them to be scribes trained for the new age. Perhaps he references himself as a scribe. Either way, the scribe here is nothing like a Pharisee or a hypocrite (in the usual stereotypical modes of conventional Christian interpretation), but is an agent who is equipped for God's coming new reign. What that agent is to do for the sake of God's newness is to have a rich treasure – things old and things new. The scribe is called to preoccupation with text – a treasure of texts, *old texts*, *new interpretations*, all in order to open to God's newness. This teaching of Jesus may be an invitation to re-imagine the preaching role as the careful custodial management of old things and new things for the sake of God's rule. That, of course, is what the scribes did:

- The old text of Moses and Pharaoh continues to empower *the new community of emancipated obedience*;
- The old text of Nathan and David continues to invite *practices of compassionate power*;
- The old text of Elijah and Ahab continues to open *new modes of land management*;

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- The old text of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar continues to describe *the new world of Jews and Gentiles shaped by doxological penultimacy*.

Old and new ... coming rule ... and the scribes manage.

2. William Cavanaugh, in his remarkable book *Torture and Eucharist*, tells how, albeit belatedly, the Roman Catholic bishops in Chile came to understand that the community-creating of eucharist was a powerful antidote to the community-destroying torture of the dictator Augusto Pinochet. They discovered that *eucharist* was stronger than *torture*. At the end of Cavanaugh's book he writes about a fictional character, Carlos, in a novel concerning this crisis. He refers to 'Carlos' but, in fact, means the community-creating capacity of the church:

> Carlos's gift is more than just the gift of seeing; his stories about people can actually alter reality ... Carlos's friends nevertheless remain skeptical, convinced that Carlos cannot confront tanks with stories, helicopters with mere imagination .... Carlos ... rightly grasps that the contest is not between imagination and the real, but between two types of imagination, that of the generals and that of their opponents.[9]

Carlos, in the novel, comments: 'We have to believe in the power of imagination because it is all we have, and ours is stronger than theirs'.[10] And Cavanaugh himself adds:

> To participate in the Eucharist is to live inside God's imagination. It is to be caught up into what is really real, the body of Christ.[11]

Scribes for the kingdom, engaged in an imagination that is stronger than the imagination of military consumerism, ponder old texts and find them contemporary. This counter-imagination is the treasure of the scribes of the kingdom. It happens by *texts* and bread and *texts* and wine and *texts* and *texts*. The oldest stories become the newest songs, stories from Moses and Nathan and Elijah and Daniel and a host of others, old stories that let the church sing, free, dangerous, energized, filled with courage. Very much depends on scribes who are trained for the kingdom.

[9] William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 278.
[10] Ibid., p. 279.
[11] Ibid.

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