

THE MORNING STAR

THE WYCLIFFE COLLEGE COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER

FEBRUARY 3 2020 | VOL. 17



On Not Getting Anything Out of Sermons

By Joseph Mangina

[Note: this blog post is adapted and abbreviated from an article of Prof. Mangina's that appeared in The Living Church, Jan. 1, 2012]

Some years ago I had an interesting email exchange with a theologian friend at another institution, someone I've known since our days together in graduate school. We got to talking about the state of contemporary preaching. My friend asked the arresting question: "How do we get preachers to get people into the story rather than trying to get something out of it?" How, in other words, do we convince seminarians, priests, and pastors that the Bible is not a resource to be accessed but a world to be entered into? That to ask the question of the Bible's "relevance" is to commit a terrific category error, since the Bible does not want to be relevant to our concerns, but to make us relevant to its concerns?

My friend went on to quote one of our grad school teachers, who said that you can always tell which direction of interpretation is operative in any sermon you hear. My friend agreed, adding that sermons that take the wrong direction—beginning with relevance—are also "unutterably boring." But it's very difficult to teach this, he said: pastors (like everyone else) either tend to "get" it or they don't. The upshot is that we have to aim at a kind of intellectual and theological conversion, showing people in a variety of ways what good preaching looks like until they "get it." After that, they will have no interest in looking back.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

Feb 5, Wed
Black History
Month Wednesday
Event - Student
Council will
provide more info

Feb 18, Tues
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Feb 28, Fri
Theology Pub
Night, p. 3

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I could not agree more—not only about the “unutterably boring” character of much contemporary preaching, but about the need for conversion of our imaginations. The idea that preaching should be experiential, pragmatic, and purpose-driven is so deeply woven into the fabric of North American Christianity that we can hardly imagine it should be otherwise. The sermon must always have something useful in it, some moral or lesson that people can “take home with them.”

But now let us suppose that all this is deeply misguided. Imagine that we have caught a glimpse of another reality, another world. Suddenly we grasp that the Bible is not about human doings and human problems. It is not really about us at all, but about God. And because it is about God it has its own weird logic, expressed in a strange, wonderful vocabulary—words like election, creation, flesh, spirit, grace, law, apocalypse. Instead of just another self-help manual, the Bible offers us something far more interesting—an account of life, the only life indeed that is worth having; life that comes from God and leads to God. Hearing of such a life, who would not be willing to surrender everything in exchange?

This is, to be sure, a theologian’s way of expressing the matter. To which the working priest or pastor may be forgiven for replying, “Yes, but does it preach?” True, the sermon is

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ultimately—is essentially—about God. But it is also spoken to the assembly and to the particular people within it. The preacher cannot simply dwell in the lectionary text, but must take the risk of interpreting the text for “Mrs. Murphy,” as the great Benedictine scholar Aidan Kavanaugh liked to put it. Kavanaugh was speaking of liturgy, but his counsel applies equally well to the sermon. If the sermon does not address the needs of Mrs. Murphy, it is hard to see why we should even bother.

I will bend on this point, but I will not break. Yes, of course the text must be interpreted for the hearers. Yes, of course the preacher must venture into the world in front of the text, the world of our hopes, fears, desires, longings, and secret guilts. This is harder work than it sounds. There is a certain kind of “biblical preaching” that rests content with an easy, obvious paraphrase of

Scripture; that takes no risks, and that therefore reaps few rewards. It is not simply that such a preacher has expounded the text but ignored the world, but has not even expounded the text. “Truth” in preaching is not just fidelity to the Bible, it is the two-edged sword of the Word disclosing how things really stand with us. To use technical language, there is no real explicatio or meditatio without applicatio; no exegesis or reflection without application.

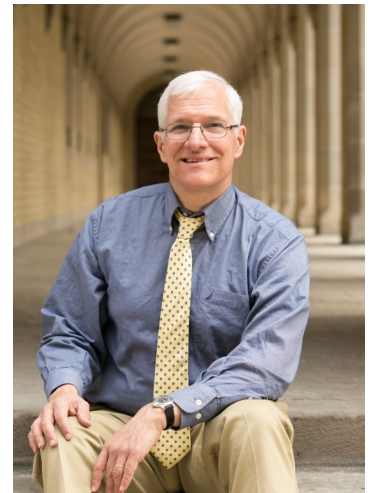
All this is perfectly true. Awareness of context, knowledge of one’s hearers, a certain political and cultural sensitivity—all these are essential items in the preacher’s toolkit. Yet they are not the main thing. God is the main thing. God is what your congregation expects to hear from you, not your jokes or political commentary or stories about your children. I will even call Mrs. Murphy as my witness here. Aidan Kavanaugh’s point about Mrs. Murphy was not, as we might think, that we should revise the liturgy to make her feel more at home. Quite the opposite: Mrs. Murphy knows what the liturgy is about—mystery, sacrifice, grace, God—far better than many a learned liturgist. The scholar wants the liturgy to be more user-friendly while Mrs. Murphy wants to adore the Trinity. We had better not, then, condescend to Mrs. Murphy.

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The same thing applies to preaching. If we step into the pulpit worried about what the congregation or we ourselves can “get out of it,” the battle is already lost. As my friend put it, our primary task is to get into the story—the story of the God who creates from nothing and who justifies the ungodly. Fleming Rutledge has laid down the homiletical rule that God needs to be the subject of the verbs. The worry this evokes—that there will be nothing left for us to “do”—betrays a deep misunderstanding, for among the chief things God creates from nothing are empowered human agents. If we begin with God’s agency, then human agency will inevitably follow, whereas the opposite is not true. This is the very logic of our lives in Christ, liberated by grace and freed for good works.

There is more to be said about what all this might look like in practice. It would, I’d suggest, mean spending relatively less time on the gospel lessons, relatively more time on the Old Testament and the Epistles. Although the gospels are central to our faith, in our present context they are all too easily moralized: do act more like Jesus, don’t act like those stupid disciples, etc. But whichever texts we preach on, our preaching should be guided by the conviction that the Word of God is sovereign and sufficient, that it makes sense of our lives more than we make sense of it. Get into the story, and you may be surprised by grace.



ABOUT

Joseph Mangina is Professor of Systematic Theology at Wycliffe College.

Retirement of John Bowen & Terry Donaldson



Last Wednesday we celebrated the careers and retirement of Dr. John Bowen, Professor Emeritus of Evangelism, and Dr. Terry Donaldson, Professor Emeritus of New Testament. They will be missed around the College! If you’d like to listen to the audio recording of the event, it is available on SoundCloud at <https://soundcloud.com/wycliffe-college/bowen-donaldson-retirement>.

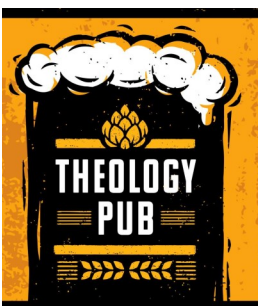
Public Events at Wycliffe



PREACHING DAY—THE PSALMS: SONGS OF HEALING

Tuesday, February 18, 2020 at 9:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. at Wycliffe College

Preaching Day is an annual event at Wycliffe College. This year we welcome Dr. Ellen Davis from Duke Divinity School, whose research interests focus on how biblical interpretation bears on the life of faith communities and their response to urgent public issues, particularly the ecological crisis and interfaith relations. For this event, Dr. Davis will be exploring preaching from the Psalms in the context of some of the traumas we experience in life and in ministry such as the opioid crisis, PTSD, and the global refugee crisis. Purchase your tickets at wycliffecollege.ca/preachingday.



THEOLOGY PUB NIGHT: BEYOND THE EVOLUTION AND CREATION DEBATE

Friday, February 28, 2020 at 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. at Wycliffe College

Denis Lamoureux, Professor of Science and Religion at St. Joseph’s College in the University of Alberta, will be our special guest at the Theology Pub Night in February. This is a free, public event. Bring your friends! For more information: wycliffecollege.ca/theologypub.

From the Registrar's Office



Dear Wycliffe Students,

If you are hoping to convocate in May 2020, please return the Graduate Information Form to the Registrar's Office as soon as possible and no later than February 17; otherwise you will have to wait until the May 2021 ceremony.

Tax forms will be available during the month of Feb and can be printed from ACORN if you are in a conjoint program and will be mailed to non conjoint students. Now is a good time to check that your address on ACORN is correct.

Barbara Jenkins, Registrar, Director of Enrolment Management

Some key academic dates

- Feb. 28: Last day to submit ThM (II) extended essays for examination for spring convocation.
- Mar. 2: Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS) application due. <https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/awards/ontario-graduate-scholarship/>
- Mar 27, 2020 - Last day to defend theses (Spring Convocation)
- Apr 3, 2020 - Absolute deadline for TSpace submissions to be approved for Spring Convocation (Note: students are given individual deadlines based on defence date)
- For more academic dates, visit <https://www.tst.edu/academic/key-academic-dates>.

Bookstore Hours

Wycliffe College Texts are available at the U of T Faculty of Law Bookstore. Regular term hours (Feb 1- April 30) are Mon-Thurs 11:30 am – 2:30 pm, Fri 3 pm – 7 pm. We will be closed for Family Day and Reading Week Feb 17-21, 2020. Contact us by email lawinfo@uoftbookstore.com or phone: 416-978-6906.

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