



Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Preface | ix |
| Acknowledgments | xv |
| 1. Marking Time: Reading Scripture at the River's Edge | 1 |
| 2. It Will Be All Right: New Rubrics for the Holy Man's Room | 19 |
| 3. The Camel and the Cash Machine: A Story We Try to Forget | 33 |
| 4. Water on a Desert Road: Splashing in the Scroll of Isaiah | 49 |
| 5. Standing Once More at the River's Edge | 65 |
| 6. Sermons Preached at the River's Edge | 79 |
| "Fragments" (After 9/11) | 79 |
| "In God We Trust" (Revelation 18) | 83 |
| "Turning Letters into Laws" (1 Corinthians 7) | 88 |
| "What the Mighty Might Learn" (2 Kings 5) | 94 |
| "No Prayer for Nineveh" (Jonah 2) | 99 |
| Notes | 105 |



Preface

When I was a first year seminarian at Yale Divinity School, Frederick Buechner came to Marquand Chapel to give the Beecher Lectures. I hate to admit that I had never heard of him at the time, though I have read and borrowed his words regularly since then. He began by taking us back to the very beginning of the lecture series, more than one hundred years before that day in the chapel: On January 31, 1872, Henry Ward Beecher traveled to Yale to deliver the first of the Beecher Lectures on preaching, which had been established in memory of his father. Beecher's biographer writes:

He had a bad night, not feeling well. Went to his hotel, got his dinner, lay down to take a nap. About two o'clock he got up and began to shave without having been able to get any plan of the lecture to be delivered within the hour. Just as he had his face lathered and was beginning to strop his razor, the whole thing came out of the clouds and dawned on him. He dropped his razor, seized his pencil, and dashed off the memorandum for it and afterwards cut himself badly, he said, thinking it out.¹

Buechner went on to recall other lecturers who came after Henry Ward Beecher: Phillips Brooks, Dean Inge, Harry Emerson

Fosdick, and Reinhold Niebuhr. Then he focused his attention—and ours—on Pilate preparing to question Jesus:

He pushes back from the desk and crosses his legs . . . Cigarette smoke drifts over the surface of the desk—the picture of his wife when she still had her looks, the onyx box from Caesar, the clay plaque with the imprint of his first son’s hand on it, made while he was still a child in nursery school. Pilate squints at the man through the smoke and asks his question.²

No one stirred or coughed. I looked down from the balcony at the tops of people’s heads, watching as some turned to those next to them, as though to say, “Did you hear that?” Others were bent down taking notes. Some of us in the balcony weren’t quite ready to claim our place on the main floor. We hadn’t preached much and we didn’t know how much liberty we could take with the Bible. Would we dare to say Pilate was smoking a cigarette? Was there any textual evidence that he had received an onyx box from Caesar? We had spent the first semester learning to do something called *exegesis*, a word most of us had never heard before arriving on campus. Exegesis didn’t encourage such imaginative speculation.

As he went on, it became clear this man named Buechner knew something about the life of the preacher. Perhaps he, too, had cut himself while shaving. He spoke in present tense, whether about Pilate or about preachers like the ones sitting there in front of him:

So the sermon hymn comes to a close with a somewhat unsteady amen, and the organist gestures the choir to sit down. Fresh from breakfast with his wife and children and a quick runthrough of the Sunday papers, the preacher climbs the steps to the pulpit with his sermon in his hand. He hikes his black robe up at the knees so he will not trip over it on the way up. His mouth is a little dry. He has cut himself shaving . . .³

But we hadn’t—cut ourselves shaving, I mean. That was the problem—all that shaving and the list of male lecturers and

Pontius Pilate and the preacher who had breakfast with his wife. The year was 1977. There were senior women who had begun their studies when the seminary was overwhelmingly male. When I arrived at school in the fall of 1976, I discovered a very robust Women's Center directed by women who were unapologetically feminist. I had barely discovered feminism before I headed east from Minnesota, but I soon found myself making up for lost time. Frederick Buechner walked into this lively feminist community without warning. After his first lecture, some women confronted him about all that shaving, all those male images, and all those men. He agreed to meet with women students that very afternoon.

The Women's Center was a lovely space on the ground floor of Bacon House, next door to where I lived. A stunning mural of strong women covered one entire wall. Gigantic homemade pillows were the only furniture in the room. Frederick Buechner sat there, cross-legged on a giant pillow, surrounded by women who were not shy in sharing their perspectives on his lecture.

"All of your images were male."

"You gave no hint that women were preachers, only preachers' wives!"

"Pilate got too much attention and you made him so very male—all that smoking and the picture of his wife. Was it necessary to say she used to be better looking?"

He was very gracious and seemed utterly perplexed, as though he had come from a far country and didn't know the language. He did not protest nor become defensive, nor did he revise his remaining lectures in any way discernible to us. Looking back now over thirty years, I am grateful for his generosity in sitting with us and listening so attentively. I am equally grateful for the women who dared to raise questions that hadn't yet occurred to me as we sat together on those giant pillows. Frederick Buechner spoke from his own experience and from the deep well of his own creativity, drawing us into the heart of the gospel and into our own lives in ways we couldn't have predicted. At a later time, we might have encouraged him to acknowledge his "social location" as feminists have urged male theologians to do—and as womanists

have challenged white feminists to do. Now I realize that his power and presence as a writer and preacher came from the truth inside his own particular skin. He could not have spoken as we insisted. Yet most of us sitting in the balcony in 1977 have not forgotten what he said. The published version of his lectures, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy & Fairy Tale*, sits on my bookshelf between Brueggemann and Buttrick, the pages dog-eared from regular visits. Some of us probably missed the full wonder of Buechner's lectures because our own experiences got in the way. He missed some of us because his own particularity both deepened and limited his pictures. Thinking back to that day in the chapel and that afternoon in the Women's Center has reminded me that we bring who we are into the *listening* as well as the *speaking*.

"The preacher pulls the little cord that turns on the lectern light," Buechner said, "and deals out his note cards like a riverboat gambler."⁴ I suppose we thought that description was far too male at the time, yet we stayed to hear the rest of what he had to say. Up there in the balcony, we put aside much of what got in the way and listened in spite of ourselves. We were there at the end to hear what the man at the lectern said just before he turned off the light:

Let the preacher tell the truth . . . which is that it is into the depths of his absence that God makes himself present in such unlikely ways and to such unlikely people that old Sarah and Abraham and maybe when the time comes even Pilate and Job and Lear and Henry Ward Beecher and you and I laugh till the tears run down our cheeks.⁵

By the time I stood at the chapel lectern to give the Beecher Lectures in 2000, three women had joined the 127-year-old procession before me. I am certain that my own particularity shaped my engagement with the biblical texts and the lectures that emerged from those encounters. There were probably some sitting in Marquand Chapel who couldn't hear what I said or

who heard what I said and experienced dissonance with their own lives.

In many ways, my lectures were more like long sermons—an occupational hazard of being in the parish longer than in the academy. Since each lecture began with a biblical text, I asked my colleague Robert Seaver if he would come to read scripture for one of the lectures. Bob taught at Union Theological Seminary for fifty-three years before retiring for a second time in 2005. He not only came the first day but made the trip from New York to New Haven for all three lectures. There is no way to describe on paper what his reading is like: not loud or churchy, not dramatic or theatrical. He doesn't draw out the word *Gawd* as though the word had no connection with this earth. I do know such reading doesn't happen without long preparation. Bob reads and rereads the text in several different versions; he talks to himself and walks around the room until the words get deep inside him. When he reads a text—even the most familiar text—I feel as though I have heard it for the very first time.

On the morning the lectures began, I was alone in Marquand Chapel, checking the height of the lectern and getting the feel of the space from that vantage point. Mostly, I was trying to ward off anxiety—even though I had started writing much farther in advance than Henry Ward Beecher did while shaving that long-ago afternoon. Bob arrived early and came into the chapel while I was standing at the lectern. He told me to stay right where I was and do some of the exercises he used in his voice building classes. We had taught together so I knew what was coming. *Say your first few sentences in a straight line like a monotone chant. Then go up a half step and do the same thing. Now speak the same lines again and let your voice swoop way up at the end of each line. Don't just stand there—raise your arm up as you swoop.* I looked through the windows in the chapel door to see if anybody was lurking outside. Seeing no one, I did exactly what he asked me to do, chanting and swooping my way through the tension. Of course, that was exactly what Bob had in mind.

An hour later, I listened as he read the very long text from 2 Kings, chapter 4. When I pulled the little cord to turn on the

Preface

light, I had heard the story as though for the first time, and that made all the difference. I dedicate this book to Robert Seaver in gratitude for fifty-three years of helping students find their voices and for ten years of life-giving friendship.

Barbara Lundblad
Epiphany 2007



Acknowledgments

This book has been coauthored by a wide circle of colleagues, friends, and family. First of all, I am deeply grateful to the faculty of Yale Divinity School and former dean Richard Wood for inviting me to give the Lyman Beecher Lectures in the fall of 2000. As I looked out into the chapel I was encouraged to see people who had been my teachers and my classmates looking back at me. I also give thanks to Union Theological Seminary for a sabbatical semester that coincided with preparation for the lectures. At the risk of forgetting some who have helped along the way, I give thanks in particular ways to the names that follow:

. . . to Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig for reminding me of the story of the Shunammite woman and for sharing insights about that text from the Jewish tradition. I will always be grateful for the time we shared worshiping in the same building while I was the pastor of Our Saviour's Atonement Lutheran Church and she the rabbi of Beth Am;

. . . to Edwina (Wyn) Wright, Director of Languages at Union, for her wise counsel about Hebrew words and phrases;

. . . to Rosemary Keller, former dean at Union, for encouraging me to join the faculty and for supporting me as I moved from parish to academy;

. . . to my colleague Janet Walton for her patience and her impatience in keeping me at this project in the years between the

lectures and the book, and to other colleagues in the Arts of Ministry field: Mary Boys, Ana Maria Diaz Stevens, and Ann Ulanov for their unwavering support;

. . . to Robert Seaver, wise mentor and friend, who is thanked in more specific ways in the Preface;

. . . to Bob Ratcliff, Academic Editor at Abingdon Press, for his helpful suggestions for the chapters that frame the lectures, and to Barbara Dick, Production Editor, for her attention to detail on every page of the book;

. . . to Carolina Trevino for diligently tracking down and verifying the quotations in the pages that follow;

. . . to Gladys Moore, Mary Forell, and Janet Peterman, my clergywomen's support group, for the twenty-four years we have met together and for their insistence that I get the book done;

. . . to Pastor Elise Brown, Pastor James Sudbrock, and the people of Advent Lutheran Church for inviting me to be part of the clergy team in that congregation, giving me a place to mark time with a particular community of faith from week to week;

. . . to my family, Nicole and Sam, who have given me their unflinching support and love through the ups and downs of writing and of living.

At the beginning and end of each day, I give thanks to God for marking time with me from the farmlands of Iowa to the streets of New York City. No matter what time it is, God comes, surprising me through words I have heard a hundred times. Mary Oliver's words about poems have taken on special meaning for me: "For poems are not words, after all, but fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry. Yes, indeed" (Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook* [New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994], 122). I hope and pray this is true not only of poems, but of sermons. Yes, indeed.