God Writes with an Ordinary Pen
by Deborah L. Wilhelm

Once I stole a purple pen from the checkout lane at our local Safeway store. Waiting in line with Mom, I'd noticed a basketful of them displayed tantalizingly, objects of function and beauty, alongside the bubble gum, batteries, and flashbulbs. Pens! Purple! Each with a purple feather! Although I was too young to know the term “impulse purchase,” I immediately experienced the impulse to own a purple pen. On a second impulse, I asked Mom to buy me one. Mom declined. So, on a third impulse, I simply slipped a purple pen into the pocket of my dress when no one was looking and carried it home. Then I hid it in my sock drawer.

The joys of ownership weren't as joyous as I'd expected, however. I'd stolen that pen, after all, and I couldn't let anyone see it, so “my” new pen lived almost exclusively in a dresser drawer, nestled among the ankle socks. Worse, I couldn't write with it. Nobody I knew owned a purple pen—so any visible purple penmanship would certainly arouse questions that I wouldn't be able to answer. And naturally, as a five-year-old, I didn't hide it very skillfully, so Mom found out. The pen and my deed were pulled out of the drawer and into the unblinking spotlight of discovery. Alas, discovery was only the beginning: Mom marched me straight back to the Safeway store where, crying many fearful tears (Do five-year-olds go to hell?) I had to return the purple pen, apologizing to the store manager and promising never to steal again. The manager was very kind, and I hereby thank him publicly for not calling the authorities and having me hauled away.

Many years later, the assembly members in my parish laughed somewhat uncomfortably when as a preacher I described my larceny and its embarrassing consequences. Afterward, probably a third of the one hundred fifty or so people present stopped to confess to me the name of the thing that they'd stolen when they were young (or some, not-so-young), how they'd been caught (or had gotten away with it), and what had happened as a result. Children listened in amazement at the door to the church as their moms said things like, “With me, it was that huge box of sixty-four Crayola crayons, and I can't figure out why Dad didn't see it bulging under my coat!” or grandfathers wryly shared, “My mother practically caught fire when she found that stolen candy.” Others mentioned cheating on a spelling test, lying about attending a forbidden movie, or blaming a sibling for misdeeds (broken glassware, anyone?) they'd committed. People spoke of lessons learned. Forgiveness requested and received. Healing, restoration. Their young ones stood by, saying little, absorbing much.

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I was a new preacher then, just beginning to learn a vital preaching precept: Each person’s life is—and is not—unique. It is—and is not—about that particular person. Perhaps this very moment, in fact, you’re remembering your own “purple pen” event. Our individual human experiences are specific appearances of a bigger thing called Experience. Our little stories? Local manifestations of the Big Story. Most preachers understand this intellectually, but the concept has powerful implications for the word shared at worship. Preachers’ words reach out to people not because they’re original, but rather because they’re not original; they have meaning not because they’re profound, but rather because they’re ordinary. Local, specific language brings the very notion of “story” to its ultimate inclusiveness—meaning that the carefully prepared example, illustration, or little story connects to the Big Story and, if spoken well, to the One Story: God’s Story.

The Great Purple Pen Debacle or any appeal to shared emotion, insight, or experience acts as a local, specific point of access to help us connect our postmodern lives, right here, right now, to the life of the God who is present in our scriptures, our assemblies, our communities, all of creation. This appeal need not be a historical saga. It need not be about the preacher. It need not even be a full-blown narrative. It simply needs to invite the listener.

It seems so basic. Nevertheless, as we collectively mourn the loss of homogenously well-catechized liturgical assemblies—if such assemblies ever actually existed—consider a (local, specific) detail that shows why this concept is critical and liberating. My theology students at the Loyola Institute for Ministry are currently studying the history and development of Catholic doctrine, in particular the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus Christ. As the students examine the scriptures, the early Christian era, and two millennia of church history, they’ve become adept at articulating an intellectual understanding of what the church teaches about Christ’s nature. They know what Augustine, Aquinas, and the Catechism say about Jesus Christ. But they’re struggling with the idea of why these statements matter. The question that they’re wrestling with is the one that issues a local, specific invitation: So what?

So what, indeed. If theology graduate students struggle with the concept, how much more so our assemblies! We say it matters, for example, that Jesus Christ is “consubstantial with the Father.” These are not mere words. Yet the people of God may nonetheless find themselves at worship repeating memorized statements that they neither have confidence in nor understand. Their minds may wander throughout the Liturgy of the Word because they’ve heard the parable of the talents a hundred times, and the preacher has preached it a hundred times, and none of it seems to connect to the joys and sorrows of their lives right now, when the stakes are much higher than a stolen pen. The unemployed recent college grad, the newly released inmate, the young bride aglow with new love, the child bullied at school, the financial planner who’s just made a huge commission and purchased a shiny new Lexus, the elderly widow craving human contact, the person in the last row who doesn’t speak a word of the language: Why should they care about Jesus’s divinity and humanity, or the Trinity, or those infamous talents? God’s people at worship may stand, sit, kneel, make all the proper responses, but wonder silently what they would never ask aloud: “Does this stuff actually matter? Is it even real?”

Worse, they may do all these things and not wonder.

One dear friend, a Roman Catholic priest and an excellent preacher, helps voice their concern: “How does this 2,000-year-old passage remain ever old yet ever new in my life? Not like learning a lesson from the past . . . which is awesome, but real Emmanuel ‘God with us,’ God with me . . . right here, right now in my life story and in the life story of this worshipping community?” Yes, this is the question. People at liturgy—ministers and assembly members alike—are hungry for God.

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1 Roy Shelly, email message to the author, February 10, 2016.
Enter the preacher with the invitation. Our scriptures tell local, specific stories about local, specific people (like Moses, Esther, Job, Elizabeth, Mary, Paul) that draw other local, specific people (like you, me, that horrible driver who won’t let your car into the lane) into the One True Story, the story of God’s creative energy and God’s constant, loving, saving intervention in human history. Indeed, God came here, as my friend says, the “real Emmanuel,” to show us the power of the communion of divinity and humanity. God, in all God’s divinity, came to humanity as one local, specific person.

Repetition, however, along with cultural and geographical distance, the changes of two thousand years of human experience, and (it must be said) uninformed or uncaring interpretation have all complicated people’s interactions with God’s word. But the God who breathed life into our scriptures—and is still found there—is the same God who breathed life into us—and is still found here. Preachers are called to interpret the scriptures over and over again in the ever-changing light of our lives, to look for God in places both obvious and obscure, to notice God’s presence, and to share that presence with others.

These responsibilities belong to all Christians, of course, but at public prayer it is preachers who invite and accompany others in seeking, noticing, acting. We use words, because words are what we have, but we do so with the knowledge that human language can only approach mystery. As preachers, we will likely never say anything truly original about God, because God is Origin. Nor will we likely say anything truly revelatory about God, because God is Revelation. We can only do what Catherine Vincie terms “naming toward God.” As Vincie says, “Our words, images, and symbols can lay claim to being truthful, but they cannot claim to express the fullness of our experiences. If this is the case with even the most basic human experiences of creaturely life, how much more so is our experience of divine mystery?”

No preacher can or should say all that can be said, which relieves us of a great burden. We have one story, told many ways—and thus with small truths, we help illumine the way to Truth. Our words invite others to see that God really is among us, to connect people individually and corporately with that “real Emmanuel,” and to invite them to take that relationship out the door of the church to breathe life into the world. Every example, every detail, every story, every purple pen, is an invitation to participate in God’s redemptive plan together.

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