On man's re-entry into his future.

The sermon as a creative act[1]

Wilfried Engemann

1. The problem of inactive preaching

The sermon shares in the act of creation by making history in the space and time of real human existence, by having an influence on real human history. In short, the sermon does what it says. So a sermon must put the word of the Creator into the language of the creatures and repeat the "Let there be...." The listeners should become witnesses of how free playfulness becomes a reality and how the prospect of a future opens up that which can guide action in the present. The "transition between old and new," referred to by Manfred Josuttis in connection with pastoral care, also has its place in the preaching process. The sermon is concerned with the individual as a "'new creature' (2 Cor 5:17a)," with "overcoming the old, liberation from captivity," which presupposes that "God's saving power"[2] becomes a present reality in language.

But these statements about preaching are not primarily empirical statements. Neither are they mere wishes. They refer to a reality that is theologically legitimate to presuppose, although, naturally, not under all circumstances. I will try to describe the problem. Before the students attending the main seminar on homiletics preach their sermon, I sometimes ask them to tell the group what concrete expectations they associate

[1] This lecture has been translated by Marget Pater.

[2] Manfred Josuttis, *Segenskräfte. Potentiale energetischer Seelsorge*, Gütersloh, 2000, 175 f. "Guilt, fear and depression, influences of personal realms of activity, compulsion resulting from [...] enforced norms, become a present reality for a moment through the use of language and are then immediately moved out of the way. [...] Here, more is conveyed than an interpretative establishment of meaning. A tortured, enslaved body is purified of guilt, liberated from fear, healed of its wounds."

with their sermon, what effect they hope it will have and, above all, what event they are hoping to set in motion or intensify by means of the sermon. "As far as it depends on you, what effect do you wish to have by preaching now?" That is the question I ask. Although we have always dealt with the task of preaching, the function of the text, the demands of relating it to the situation and other aspects of homiletics, the question about the *intended effect* of the sermon sometimes gives rise to quite tough dialogues. These dialogues reveal that the students understand the effect of a sermon (at most) as making certain elements of content clear.

> "What effect am I hoping for? I should like to make clear what Paul understood by justification."
> I go on to ask, "And what *did* Paul understand by justification?"
> Answer: "That we do not have to earn grace."
> I remark, "That is not wrong. But that is a statement and it does not say anything about the *effect* you want your sermon to have, as far as it depends on you."
> "All right. Then I should like people to be *reminded* that they are justified by grace."

Why is it so hard to convey that preaching does not only need a *syntax* that is rhetorically thought through and *semantics* that are hermeneutically appropriate, but also has a *pragmatics* and is thus an act with consequences? Despite all the modesty with which the preacher as a creature uses language, the powerful means of the Creator, why is it that many sermons lack a "deed" character and often do not even leave a clear imprint on the memory?[3] What makes sermons so frequently unable to penetrate to the reality of the present or to set their sights on the future and why do they hardly ever express well-founded expectations that might affect what we do or refrain from doing in the

[3] The impression that "a sermon was preached" is one of the standard responses in discussions after sermons. Whereas for other kinds of texts or genres of speech people are usually able to say what the author's or speaker's intention was—or at least what the general subject was (what title one could give to the whole)—with sermons this seems to be incomparably more difficult.

present? Why do they neither speak a decisive word nor open up a dialogue? Instead, they circle around the text like a snake around its prey and believe that to be a homiletic act as such.

Such "inactive preaching" is probably due, on the one hand, to a tradition of theological education which has mainly left *practical* theology the job of including the question of human existence in space and time (and not only as a *philosophical* issue) when mediating between tradition and situation. Above all, students learn to reproduce correctly historical lines of argument, with the help of, for example, their "interpretation"[4] of Biblical texts.

On the other hand, the dialogue also reflects a desire addressed to homiletics itself. The stimuli, which contributed to the insights of theology and of the science of communication into the nature of preaching as an act, have certainly not been at the forefront in homiletics—at least, not when the question is asked about the theological assumptions and dimensions of preaching that really intervene in reality. The publications available show that other theological questions have been considered more extensively and that each is certainly important.

However, the appropriate approach to a *sermon that also causes what it talks about to happen* is primarily that of creation theology. Hence, our second step will be to discuss the fundamental *theological aspects and arguments* that determine preaching of this kind. Then, in the third part, we can name the *homiletic consequences*—both theological and in the practice of preaching—which try to do justice to the creative character of sermons in content and form.

2. Brief theology of a sermon with creative character

2.1 The theological context of a sermon with creative character

It took some time before homiletics began to accept that there

[4] But in this case, "interpretation" often means nothing more than using the right terms to refer to other terms. This way of relating terms to one another in preaching (which has nothing to do with the idiosyncratic force of the "open work of art" discussed in the aesthetics of reception) tends to paralyse the active nature of preaching.

are genuinely *theological* reasons for speaking in a specific way about preaching as a communication event. Preaching does not only *transmit content*, it also *shapes relationships*. God speaks to his creature and thus creates community with him. God speaks to the human being in order to participate in his life, not to provide him with information.[5] What preaching communicates is not something like the latest news; its intention is rather to create or develop relationships—relationships between God and us, relationships among us and also our relationship to ourselves. The faith that is awakened and strengthened by preaching is therefore not the expression of affirming or accepting the truth of incredible information; on the contrary, the *faith* which results from preaching and at which it aims, is the *expression of relatedness* and—in that connection—of a new existence.

That preaching is communication in this sense has been discussed thus far in reference to soteriology, ecclesiology, eschatology, pneumatology, and incarnation. For example, preaching is of *soteriological* importance as *redemptive communication* because God's word is the salvation of the human being. "You are mine!" is God's judgement on the individual (Isa 43:1). However, this is not a claim to ownership but a judgement on being. "You are mine!" that is, "Do not be afraid. The claims of other powers have faded away. You have been saved and are no longer anyone's victim, not even the victim of your own self-destructive power." *Ecclesiological* aspects have been emphasised in homiletics above all in order to make clear that proclamation in general and preaching in particular are a communicative task and that this is the basis for the preaching ministry.[6] The *pneumatological* aspect of homiletics[7] has examined the question of what it means to preach "in the Spirit"[8] without having to demonstrate special spiritual qualities or presuming in a

5 Wilfried Engemann, 'Zum Problem der Maschinisierung der Kommunikation. Heraus-forderungen für den Erwerb und die Pflege von Religiosität in der Gegenwart,' *WzM* 3 (2000), 141-155.
6 Wilfried Engemann, 'Wie kommt ein Prediger auf die Kanzel? Elemente zu einer Theologie der Predigt [...],' in Albrecht Grözinger et al. (ed.), *Traktate zur Praktischen Theologie und ihren Grundlagen*, Waltrop, 1999, 40-57.
7 Rudolf Bohren, *Predigtlehre*, Gütersloh, 1993.6

fatal way to be superior to one's congregation in spirituality. As an event in the Spirit, preaching is *sovereign communication*, in which one can speak of God *and* the preacher and the listener as *actors* whose freedom is not mutually restricted but rather becomes all the greater, the closer the relationships become. In so far as preaching is also *personal communication*, arguments related to the incarnation also play a part in determining its nature. If God became man in Jesus Christ, this also implies that the word of this Christ enters into the conditions of personal communication. We cannot hear the word of God except in the words of human beings. God speaks to us on *our* terms and these are the conditions of personal communication. Naturally, these theological features are related to one another.

All these perspectives mentioned also have implications related to creation theology. For example, when the sermon expresses God's saving judgement on human existence, it is part of God's creative activity. And the sermon as personal communication also has elements of creation theology: through his creature, the Creator turns to creation; he engages the human being to communicate his word.

But that preaching is also *communication in action* and stands *in continuity with the event of creation* and that every confrontation with the gospel opens up a future and changes human conditions of existing and living into the conditions of the kingdom of God, that is not so obvious in the theological approaches we have outlined. However, the message of the one whom human beings crucified and God raised is not effective if the sermon declares for the nth time that "since Easter death does not have the last word," but rather—as in the case of the women on Easter morning—if it stops people making pilgrimages to their own graves. The task of the preacher can be compared to that of the messenger who, according to Mark 16:1-8, crouches in the grave and explains to the women, "You have no business

8 What Walter Kasper writes in the christological context about the function of the Spirit can be applied to the sermon: the vertical and horizontal relations that are strengthened in a sermon imply that the more strongly they are established "in the Spirit," the "greater the liberation of the human being." See W. Kasper, *Jesus der Christus*, Leipzig 1981, esp. 279-289, here 286f.

to be here any more. Stop treating death in this cosmetic way." Preaching has to do with rolling away stones, blockading graves, and dispersing the numerous ways of coming to terms with death in life.[9]

2.2 The theological heart of a sermon with creative character

When God speaks, he makes history. This is the result of the creative force of his word. Without this word, the human being would not come onto the scene at all. But, according to the accounts of creation, it is not enough for God just to have humankind there. God creates humans as responsive beings.[10] He causes them to speak and engages them for what God's word does. That human beings came onto the world's stage in this way has immediate consequences for an understanding of preaching as a creative act.

2.2.1 Effect of the creative word in space and time

In creation, history is spoken. What makes sermons so uneventful and inactive is their spacelessness and timelessness, among other things. And this is a result of their forgetting the present: they cause Paul and Jesus, the prophets and the psalmists, to appear on the stage; and they have little difficulty about discussing utopias. But one rarely feels that what they say has anything to do with the *circumstances here and now*. That type of preaching is "unreal" because it ignores the concrete historical situation, which could be a morning of creation on which God calls people to life anew. The human being cannot identify with such sermons because they do not state either the place or

9 An attempt to deal with Mark 16:1-8 along these lines can be found in Wilfried Engemann, *Ernten, wo man nicht gesät hat. Rechtfertigungspredigt heute*, Bielefeld 2001, 33-41. That the women are sent precisely to *Galilee* for the sake of their future and that those who have listened to a sermon are sent out again after the service into their *everyday life*, is not a contradiction but belongs to the heart of this story; the story of the resurrection will continue not in Jerusalem, nor in Rome or in other privileged places but in the places where people think they cannot live because they have no work there or live in difficult conditions or because they have simply had enough of being there.

10 Oswald Bayer, 'Schöpfung—systematisch-theologisch,' *TRE* 30 (1999), 326-348, here 326.

the time of the event. The terms "place of the act" and "time of the act" are not only of interest to criminology but also important for preaching of a creative nature.

The sermon plays a significant *part in enabling human beings as new creatures* to live and act by faith under the conditions of the contemporary reality they experience in space and time. To make this contribution is certainly not an easy task. One difficulty—as we learn from Georg Picht—is that we "have no idea" about our particular present time. "The present is a *terra incognita*."[11] This is connected with the strange simultaneity of past, present and future, which makes it difficult for us to perceive at an analytical distance what is actually and really happening *now*.[12] But it is the aim of preaching to attempt here and now to break through into the real present of a period of salvation history. There is no other means of mediating anew each time between tradition and situation in a way that enables tradition to continue and situations to be changed deliberately. "If we want to be certain that someone is alive now, we cause them to give us a signal that they are present *at this time in this place*. Our criterion for the reality of facts or phenomena is their presence in their particular "here and now." Whatever the word 'reality' may mean, it certainly implies the present—mediated or immediate, broken or undisguised, accessible or inaccessible."[13]

Without wanting to detract from preaching's focus on the present, the congregation can naturally be helped by *experience* to direct new expectations to it. Against the background of past

11 Georg Picht, 'Der Durchbruch in die wirkliche Gegenwart der Geschichte,' in Georg Picht, *Von der Zeit. Vorlesungen und Schriften*, Stuttgart, 1999, 389-421, here 390 f.

12 The phenomenon observed by Picht (that the present seems to be a *terra incognita*) can be understood better with the help of Reinhard Koselleck's time layer model than with that of Picht's time horizon model along Heidegger's lines. Koselleck borrows the time model from geology: several layers of stone from different ages (and which were formed at different speeds) are present simultaneously. By referring to the multiple layers of time forming the present, Koselleck tries to escape the false alternative between cyclical and linear images of time. See Reinhard Koselleck, *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik.—With a contribution by Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Frankfurt/M., 2000, esp. 9-22.

13 Koselleck, *Zeitschichte*, 390. Italics W. E.

experiences of faith and life, the congregation can develop ideas for the present and count on the future. Here it should naturally not be forgotten that *expectations that were fulfilled also belong to our experience*. The expectation that "everything will turn out well," that a particular conflict can be resolved and that one always has the opportunity to begin again—people's "experiences of expectations" like these should be used in sermons and not trivialised or dogmatically rejected as uncertain. This should not simply lead to affirmation but also to correction, to corrections which leave future prospects open.

However, the expectations considered should not only come from a meta-historical level of time (proverbs such as "He who laughs last laughs longest") and also not only be expectations on an intermediate time level ("I hope I shall not have to experience a war"), but also real "short term successions of before and after,"[14] the existence of which in everyday life decides whether I perceive my life as fulfilled or unfulfilled, whether I can be patient or give up the game, whether I hate myself for my yearnings or perceive the anticipation of their fulfilment as "vital primal categories."[15]

But this use of old and new experiences and expectations presupposes overcoming the false alternative between cyclical and linear thinking. This brings us to another difficulty in anchoring the creative word in space and time. Every sequence in the events of the world and in the life of the individual comprises both linear and recurrent elements. Our congress here in Doorn near Utrecht is naturally a unique and perhaps even extraordinary event; but it is also only possible because of repeated processes on the railways, in air traffic, and so forth, and because the organisers of this conference know more or less how such a gathering should be structured so that it also *becomes* a unique event.

Another example is the political changes of 1989 that were certainly unique. They can be entered on a line just as anything

14 Koselleck, *Zeitschichte*, 217 f.

15 According to Hans Thomae, anticipation can be considered "a vital primal category" wherever a person designs and realises something. See Hans Thomae, *Das Wesen der menschlichen Antriebsstruktur*, Leipzig, 1944.

innovative can be entered on a hypothetical time line. And yet they comprise recurrent elements and structures that we know from other major changes. The political changes in Germany are not only unique. Changes in history are something like a postal worker who comes each day at the same time but brings unique news each time—for example, the death of a friend. It is a process with a repetitive structure *and* the quality of the unique.[16]

If the sermon linguistically can express what is historically unique in the life of a congregation or of an individual, it should not simply compete with the existing structures of experience and patterns of expectation. One cannot do justice in preaching to the historicity of God's new creative action by searching (during one's sermon preparation) for something completely new which can be marked as a point on a line like the (expected) Last Day. The unique will only be surprising against the background of experience and the expectations related to it. And the surprise comes when the familiar transition "from previous experience to the expectation of what will come is broken and has to be constituted anew."[17] That is how a new experience comes about. Approaches in homiletics that have contributed to reintroducing the category of "situation" have served the attempt to shape listening to the word of God as an occasional break in continuity between experience and expectation. "The sermon," according to Ernst Lange's creation theology hypothesis, "must show that and why the promise 'deserves' to be believed and how the promise believed changes reality."[18]

2.2.2 *Transmitting power to live here and now*

In the story of creation, we are told that God perceives his

16 See Koselleck, *Zeitschichten*, 21 f. and on the whole issue 19-22.

17 Koselleck, *Zeitschichten*, 23.

18 Ernst Lange, 'Zur Aufgabe der christlichen Rede,' in Rüdiger Schloz (ed.), *Predigen als Beruf. Aufsätze zu Homiletik, Liturgie und Pfarramt*, Munich, 1982?, 52-67. W. E. Ernst Lange's understanding of reality or the "homiletic situation" is, however, misinterpreted if it is reduced to "negative" or at least "resistant" empirical experiences. See in this connection J. Hermelink, *Die homiletische Situation. Zur jüngeren Geschichte eines Predigtproblems*, Göttingen, 1992; for the context here especially 265-270.

power to act when he speaks a powerful word. One would also expect a sermon with creative character to be a *powerful word, constituting reality.*

This powerful word is directed to the human ability to live in freedom and community. In short, it transmits *power to live.* That is a risky idea. But what else should a sermon, which expresses God's powerful word in the present, transmit if not the possibility of emerging from the limitations of one's own life context caused by sin to live in freedom thanks to regaining a relationship with God? The freedom that comes from God's powerful word is the response of the human being to the word of the Creator and is expressed in the ability to live. The power to live is practiced above all in the freedom to act and to achieve something. In this connection, Oswald Bayer even speaks of freedom as a "specifically human form [...] of the power to live transmitted in a worldly way."[19] This effect of a sermon—itself a form of power to act—would be an expression of its creative character.

Thus, creation and preaching are intended by nature to be "efficient." Anyone who rejects the question of the efficiency of preaching as presumptuous has failed to recognise that it is the *effect* of the sermon that confirms its *meaning.* A merely correct sermon that is exegetically incontestable and dogmatically flawless but has no "pragma," a sermon that does nothing to anyone, does not seduce, entangle, or change anyone, that sort of sermon is like a stifled call to chaos which neither establishes reality nor produces an echo. In contrast, the word of God is claimed to have the power to coat chaos with divine order (cf. Genesis 1 and 2).[20] All of a sudden, there is light alongside the darkness. There is up and down, fullness and emptiness—there are now "signs" (Hebrew: אות; Greek: σημεια; Latin: *signa*) which offer people guidance in life and in faith.[21]

In this sense, the sermon can be described as a creative act. It is expected to form structures that can introduce order into the

[19] Bayer, 'Schöpfung,' 342.

[20] See also Psalms 33:9, "For the Lord spoke and it came to be; he commanded and it stood forth."

chaos of life. The sermon is an act that does not first need to be affirmed or declared right; it is a process in which light and darkness, top and bottom, back and front, fullness and emptiness become visible in the *sign.* Without needing at this point to provide an excursus on the reception of semiotics in homiletics,[22] we can summarise for our context: preaching is a matter of erecting signs formed by language—signs which help people to perceive themselves as creatures in God's world,[23] signs which they need in order to structure the realm in which they live.

The trend observed by Manfred Josuttis to understand the service—including the sermon—either only as a "system of signs" or only as a "powerful event" can be traced back to alternative conceptions of liturgics or homiletics. In view of this evidence, it is all the more important to make clear that power is communicated *on the basis of signs* and that systems of signs can describe how power is communicated.[24]

2.2.3 Continuing the dialogue with the Creator

As at creation, the human being should also not just be addressed by the sermon, not merely requested to "respond," but, above all, enabled to *continue the dialogue* autonomously with his creator.[25] The continuation of the living dialogue is nec-

[21] The many ways in which "sign" is used in German correspond to the multilayered meaning in Hebrew. The term is already found in its full semantic breadth in the priestly writings. It "refers to the visible appearance of a comprehensive divine order which comprises nature and time, is concentrated in the history of Israel and finally comes to completion in worship" (F. Stolz, *THAT*, Vol.1, Munich, 1978, 91-95, here 91).

[22] See the review in Wilfried Engemann, 'Semiotik, praktisch-theologisch,' in *TRE* 31 (2000), 134-142.

[23] Accordingly Karl Barth demands of the sermon the "attempt [...] to create around the hidden word a zone of 'attention, respect and objective understanding,' [...thus] to create something like a *space* within the human thought or, to put it still more modestly, to mark it out, to erect warning, promising, meaningful *signs* as a witness to everybody, signs which they will at least not ignore, which they can not easily confuse with other signs [...]" (Karl Barth, 'Menschenwort und Gotteswort in der christlichen Predigt,' *ZZ* 1925, 119-140, here 130).

[24] Manfred Josuttis, 'Gottesdienst als Zeichensystem und als Machtgeschehen,' *VuF* 40/2 (1995), 53-64, here 53.

essary to preserve the freedom of the individual in community with God and with others.

When man is called to live in the context of the creation event, his relationship to God is defined. He is a creature facing the Creator. The fact that man is alive is the expression of a relationship, not the result of passing a test. And it is possible for him to remain alive only because the Creator himself shows himself to be the preserver who sometimes blocks his way and sometimes wrestles with him or carries him. God does not maintain a relationship with man in order to have someone to serve him. Rather, human beings are engaged in a dialogue so that their relation to God remains alive and can form the basis of their existence in the world. In his role as Creator, God is not the "poet of the world"[26] but rather engaged in conversation with his creatures.

However one describes the exchange of words sketched in the creation story—as speaking-answering-responding or as requesting-granting-expecting—*in creation God responds to humankind's request for community in freedom.* Or, to be more precise, God anticipates this request by coming to the human being and setting another human being at his side. The responsive nature of this divine act to the urgent question and request of man is expressed in the joyful, amazed exclamation: "But that is...! Bone of my bone! Flesh of my flesh!" (Gen. 2:23) Such elements are only found as part of the spoken give-and-take of addressing and responding.[27]

25 The homiletic emphases on semiotics and reception aesthetics are directed particularly to the structural conditions for such a sermon in the sense that they make the meaning of the sermon depend on its ability to be continued. See, for example, Wilfried Engemann, *Semiotische Homiletik. Prämissen—Analysen—Konsequenzen*, Tübingen, 1993.

26 Expression of Alfred North Whitehead, *Prozeß und Realität. Entwurf einer Kosmologie*, Frankfurt/M., [1929] 1979, 618. The difference in descriptions of the act of creation hinted at here points to two different conceptions of creation theology.

27 See in this connection also Bayer, 'Schöpfung,' 332. In his work, Oswald Bayer repeatedly emphasises that creation is mediated in a creaturely way and must be understood as "creatures speaking to creatures." See Oswald Bayer, *Schöpfung als Anrede. Zu einer Hermeneutik der Schöpfung*, Tübingen 1990, 16.

The preacher and the listener are both called upon to play their own part in the conversation in which they are involved. This happens when they link what they are reading or hearing with something that is not in the text and not said during the sermon. This is not only an intellectual act of understanding but also equally a new, pragmatic linguistic formulation of the word of God in the form of one's own admission. However, a sermon does not do justice to the exchange-of-words structure of communicating the power to live by trying to bring an old text "back to life again." That would not be witness. Rather, it is a matter of a new text, a new, living witness, proceeding from an encounter with a witness to the Christian tradition that has become a text. It is important that the history that the witness of the text has made for and with the preacher be sealed by the witness of his sermon. At the moment when the preacher recognises and witnesses to the fact that the text has made history for him and this has led to a sermon, the text itself becomes historical.[28] Its place is taken—in a pragmatic respect—by the sermon as the form of interpretation of the text.

Based on the responsive basic tone of the creation event, the focus of homiletic interest rests not on understanding old *texts* but on the *person* who is able to live in freedom and community because of the sermon. To put it more pointedly: it is not a question of explaining a text to the listeners with the help of examples from daily life but of helping them, in reference to the text, to be able to perceive themselves as loved, redeemed, and expected by God as a "new creation."

The "textual death of the sermon"[29] comes about precisely because of the reanimation attempts when, during the service,

28 "Historicity is never a feature of the text which one can grasp as one grasps a cat by the tail. Historicity must be given and granted to the text through interpretation. Historicity is not a description of an attribute but a relational term, describing a particular relationship between the interpreter and a text that has made history for him. So historicity is not the prerequisite but the result of textual interpretation" (Klaus Weimar, *Enzyklopädie der Literaturwissenschaft*, 1980, 197, §337).

29 Wilfried Engemann, '"Unser Text sagt..." Hermeneutischer Versuch zur Interpretation und Überwindung des "Texttods" der Predigt,' *ZThK*, 3 (1996), 450-480.

the preacher gathers the exegetes and historians together with the congregation around the text which he presents as if on a dissection bench: the limbs of the text are moved to and fro, as lifeless as parts of a corpse; a cut is made here or there and finally the result of the post-mortem is made known: "The text says...." How should the congregation respond? "How interesting!" "That is new to me." "How marvellous! I'm in favour of that too!" Or, "How true! That is in line with what I expected." No. In the sermon, I have to say what the text *does not* say but what *must* be said after my study of the text in my situation as a contemporary of my congregation.

It will be hard for the sermon to acquire a creative character if the preacher does not undertake this task. The creative power of the word of God is not "called up" from the old texts but grows in each case from living witness that comes out of the mutual conversation between God and the human being.

All three aspects—historical relevance, mediated competence in life, starting a dialogue—are of fundamental importance when defining the task of the sermon. Preaching should open up space for people in which the power to live can be applied as freedom for contemporary action. In the preaching process the listeners should have ground formed under their feet, which they will not have to leave when they go out of the church. Through the sermon, the human being should break through again to his real present in the name of the Creator and find the future open which he lost when he left paradise.

3. Criteria for a sermon with creative character

A sermon that—in analogy to the event of creation—wants to create reality must become the starting point for new stories. Otherwise, it is not "pragmatic." A sermon that—in analogy to Genesis 1:28—wishes to open up space for the individual to live and act, has not achieved its aim if one can simply agree with it because what it says is right. A sermon of a creative nature enables the listeners to *continue* the sermon and thus they become doers of the word. So what kind of sermon are we talking about here? It is not enough to circle around its core in creation theology. We have to ask what features make it a creative act.

3.1. Structuring chaos—opening up leeway

The term "leeway" generally describes a framework for movement or decision that allows for independent action. Leeway is made available when personal participation is desired because intervention is expected, because a complete prior programming of particular processes in a technical, political, or social system would endanger the system itself and result in chaos.[30]

The metaphor of leeway recurs in modern philosophical conceptions wherever it is a question of the human possibility to act freely and lovingly in the present as it really is. Each "new leeway," according to Georg Picht in his analysis of time, makes life possible in a "time which no longer needs to be projected but makes all projections possible."[31] Something comparable is also made available to humankind in creation. It creates the space which the human being cannot create for himself, a space in which chaos is under control and which he discover as having been prepared for him—a space which constitutes the foundation for his life and future.

In the act of creation, "the Creator creates space for his creatures."[32] According to Genesis 1 and 2, it is a feature of creation that God creates space for human beings to live, decide, and act where they can and should act autonomously.[33] The experience of having overcome hopelessness and narrowness with God's help and being able again to decide freely and act in love is described correspondingly in the Psalms in spatial terms, "You

30 Wilfried Engemann, 'Der Spielraum der Predigt und der Ernst der Verkündigung,' in *Die Predigt als offenes Kunstwerk. Homiletik und Rezeptionsästhetik*, E. Garhammer and H.-G. Schöttler (ed.), Munich, 1998, 180-200, esp. 181-185.

31 Georg Picht, 'Spielraum, Spielregeln und Schemata des Weltspiels der Philosophie,' in Georg Picht, *Von der Zeit. Vorlesungen und Schriften*, Stuttgart, 1999, 611-666, here 648. Reinhard Koselleck finds such time granted above all in the "lasting conditions within whose scope the new normally comes about" (Koselleck, *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik*, 206).

32 Bayer, 'Schöpfung,' 334.

have set my feet in a broad place" (Psa 31:8), "You gave a wide place for my steps" (Psa 18:36), "The Lord led me forth into a broad place" (Psa 18:19), "Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place."[34] So the creation or regaining of space to live is "response to lament."[35]

If one says that a sermon can be such a space, one is assuming that texts and speech have a *spatial structure*, that they can be "entered" and "lived in" and can lead or abduct people into other worlds. But such structures do not come about automatically. They have to be considered—meaning the provisions that one adopts to assist the readers or listeners to play specific parts. These parts they must play in order to penetrate into the text, that is, to understand and to *do* it.

For this approach, literary scholarship has developed models in hermeneutics, but also in homiletics and in other fields of research, which make clear that the "construction" structures of a text can correspond to particular "action" structures on the side of the reader or hearer.[36] At this point, we shall concentrate on the question of how such spaces are constructed in the context of proclamation. The very way in which Jesus preached makes evident that the people who heard his words immediately became presenters of the meaning of his message, *actors in a new world-time-space*, bodily witnesses to the gospel and doers of the word in the true sense. The Biblical texts themselves, especially the parables, are also designed not only to question the existing reality of the world but also simultaneously to create new spaces for the ability to grasp and act and to lead the

33 See in the first account (Gen 1:1-2:4a) 1:28f. and in the second account (Gen. 2:4b-24) 2:19-20a.
34 Also, "God allured you out of distress into a broad place" (Job 36:16).
35 Bayer, 'Schöpfung,' 334.
36 For literary science, for example, Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*, Munich 1994[4], 61-63; for hermeneutics, for example, Hartmut Raguse, *Der Raum des Textes. Elemente einer transdisziplinären theologischen Hermeneutik*, Stuttgart-Berlin-Cologne, 1994; for homiletics, for example, Wilfried Engemann, '"Unser Text sagt..." Hermeneutisicher Versuch zur Inter-pretation und Überwindung des "Texttods" der Predigt,' *ZThK* 3 (1996), 450-480, 474.

way into them. They make a space available to readers and listeners in which they can revise their views of the world and themselves and find new possibilities for acting.

Karl Heinrich Bieritz, in a discussion of different approaches to preaching that deals with the sermon as an "open work of art," refers to their common prehistory in the openness of the gospel: "Once upon a time, as we hear, there was a word which set people free. Instead of tying them to the instructions of the common mind, it let them go their own way. This word did not brush them under the carpet of public opinion but taught them to stand upright. This word did not limit them to their bitter experiences [...] but *opened their eyes to the unlimited possibilities of the kingdom of heaven*. This word, we are told, was called 'the gospel' in those days."[37]

Sermons with a creative character should take account of the leeway that people need in order to be able to make something of the gift and task of their creaturely existence. The extent to which a sermon achieves this depends, *inter alia*, on whether its form corresponds to its content, that is, whether the structure of the sermon really guides one into a space, whether it can be "entered" or is barricaded with dogmatic formulae—in short, whether it is "open" or not. The degree to which a sermon is open is in inverse proportion to the degree of its randomness: a sermon which can be continued and is thus open does not put this or that choice before me, but creates a unique space for me in which everything has its place, where everything that happens is subject to particular conditions, in which special laws apply—just as in creation—but where I am now also intended to be an actor and can act freely. The aim of such a sermon is not primarily to fill in gaps in knowledge or to establish Christian morality in people's everyday lives; creative preaching is geared to human existence in freedom by disturbing the conditions surrounding the lack of freedom. It is obvious that a sermon with

37 Karl-Heinrich Bieritz, 'Offenheit und Eigensinn. Plädoyer für eine eigensinnige Predigt,' in Erich Garhammer and Heinz-Günther Schöttler (ed.), *Predigt als offenes Kunstwerk. Homiletik und Rezeptionsästhetik*, Munich, 1999, 28-50, here 29 (italics W. E.).

this intention will naturally *also* be informative and lead to changes in behaviour.

But how does this happen? What is required for a sermon to be both *related* in content to the event of creation and *involved* in this event through its structure?

3.2. Anticipating the future—shaping the present

The creative act of preaching is an event that is related to all three dimensions of time. Naturally, the present is particularly important because it is the temporal mode of faith as such. Faith needs assurance here and now. And this is given in the pledge made to all generations simultaneously: "I *am* the Lord your God."[38] Without the promise and experience of the present, one cannot speak comprehensibly about the future; it can be expected only as the result of "God's presence which promises itself."[39] But precisely for this reason, it is also important to give shape to this open future of human history in the language of the sermon. Where preaching takes place, the future of the individual in community with God should be kept open or reopened—as in the creation story. Preaching should make plausible that God, the Creator, who causes life to spring out of chaos, will also accompany this life through new chaos in the future.[40]

The basis for this is firstly the experience gained by life and faith. That enables one, to a certain extent, to anticipate what is to be expected of God and of life.

"The 'experience' which can be used as a foundation for looking to the future is not some diffuse 'empiricism' which applies everywhere and to everyone and can therefore no longer

38 Exodus 20:2 (see also Gen 15:7; Exo 6:6; Isa 41:4; 43:11; 45:5, and so forth).

39 Bayer, 'Schöpfung,' 333. Jürgen Hübner's investigation is also relevant in this context: 'Eschatologische Rechenschaft, kosmologische Weltorientierung und die Artikulation von Hoffnung,' in Konrad Stock (ed.), *Die Zukunft der Erlösung. Zur neueren Diskussion um die Eschatologie*, Gütersloh, 1994, 147-175, esp. 167-175.

40 This is the theme of all the texts that somehow refer to the creation event. See, for example, the hopes of a good end based on God's creative action—namely the return to Israel—in Isaiah 40:12 and the eschatological expectations in Colossians 3:10 and 2 Corinthians 5:17.

be experienced. Here, experience means a phenomenon of life [itself] which [...] took shape in the unique situation of an unrepeatable 'here and now.'"[41] The hearers of a sermon must thus first hear reference to what they have experienced—and in a certain sense now *are*. Otherwise, the sermon ignores their basis for expectations of the future and might lead to its collapse.

Philosophers of all times have endeavoured to define more precisely the human ability of πρσλψιζθεσυ or *anticipatio*,[42] of "*a priori* anticipation,"[43] of anticipating a "known unknown,"[44] or simply to "forecast."[45] The approaches developed in this connection use different models to show that the human being has "operational prerequisites" acquired from experience, which enable him to act in anticipation, that is, to find perspectives for moulding life in the present. *Without anticipation*, words, sentences and actions—indeed the whole of life—remains *without intention*.[46]

If one has no practice in anticipatory language, one does not only fail to take the experience of the congregation seriously, one also deprives it of the possibility of finding the right direction in the present. If the sermon does not anticipate, it also leaves the hearer uncertain about what it is worth living for. The human being, who is open to the world and to God because he

41 Picht, 'Durchbruch,' 417 f.

42 Cicero, *De legibus*, Liber I, Paris, 1548, 24.

43 According to Kant, a graduality is attributed to each reality which one can perceive (e.g. with regard to temperature, weight, light, etc.) and this makes it possible to anticipate other degrees a priori. In brief, based on the degree of reality which one perceives, one can conclude something about another degree of this reality that one does not perceive. See I. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Leipzig, 1979, A 167; A 170; A 341.

44 Edmund Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil*, Hamburg 1964, 35.

45 Reinhard Koselleck, 'Die unbekannte Zukunft und die Kunst der Prognose,' in Koselleck, *Zeitschichte*, 203-221.

46 Hence, Edmund Husserl also describes anticipation as the "mode of 'intentionality' " (Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil*, 67 f.) G. A. Kelly even believes that the way in which a person undergoes certain processes of their life "is psychologically determined by the ways in which [they] anticipate events" (G. A. Kelly, *The psychology of personal constructs*, 1965, 120, quoted from F. Weinert, 'Antizipation II (psychologisch),' in *HWP* 1 (1971), 423-425, here 424).

is created, *needs* conceptions, images and terms relating to what he can expect. The individual depends on future prospects in order to be able to exist. People must anticipate their future despite or because of its "empirical inaccessibility to experience" in order to be able to act—whether that which was anticipated happens exactly that way or not. It is already important for the present.

For the pattern of proclamation in both the Old and New Testaments, this anticipatory structure is of fundamental importance. What will happen "when the Lord sets free the prisoners of Zion? Then we shall feel as if we are dreaming. Then our mouth will be filled with laughter and our tongue with praise. Then the prisoners will return. Then those who sowed in tears will reap with joy and harvest their sheaves."[47] *Experience and imagination simultaneously*[48] also determined the faith of the early Christians. What they did or did not do everyday was affected by something that is called "early second coming" and related to a future of which they certainly had some conception.

When community with God is perfected, the fragmentary will come to an end; then it will be as if a dark mirror is removed from our eyes (1 Cor 13:8-12), then "the last enemy, death, will be destroyed" (1 Cor 15:26), then a trumpet will sound, then it will be time for a transformation—and people will recognise that we belong to the kingdom of God (1 Cor 15:47-55). Finally, Paul summarises, "Forgetting what lies behind, I press on toward the goal for the prise of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phi 3:13b-14). In this connection, we should naturally also examine the details of the anticipatory images in Revelation: the elaborate descriptions of the new Jerusalem, the appearance of the lamb and his procession with the one hundred and forty-four thousand in his train.

In addition to the *guidance* that it provides for the present,

47 From Psalms 126.

48 In this connection see Werner H. Ritter, 'Kindliche Religion und Phantasie—dargestellt an einem exemplarischen Kapitel der Religionspädagogik,' in Werner H. Ritter (ed.), *Religion und Phantasie. Von der Imaginationskraft des Glaubens*, Göttingen, 2000, 151-180, here 162-168.

anticipation is important for its *ability to change situations*. We are familiar with this in elections to the federal parliament in Germany, among other things. The prediction of a particular percentage of votes can affect the outcome of the election. The *anticipation* of particular conditions can contribute to these conditions being *realised*. At this point, there is clearly a deficit in the theory and practice of preaching.

Friedrich Niebergall suggested that the sermon should first talk about the "conditions assumed" in the congregation, then about the quite different ideas ("norms") of the gospel and finally mention the appropriate "objective and subjective aids."[49] This has influenced forms of preaching to a greater or lesser extent right down to the present. Although it is certainly desirable to start from the "actual situation" and this could not be taken for granted in Niebergall's days, this homiletic strategy lacks a decisive perspective. The sermon must not only refer to the conditions that can be assumed to form the basis and then somehow include them; it must also deal with the conditions that can be expected if the sermon effects what it has discussed. In other words, homiletics has to deal not with two but with three situations. The hearers are not only interested in the "situation of the text" (that should be known to the preacher, above all), nor should the listeners be tied down to the "situation today" (they should be made aware of this mainly at certain points); it is also important to anticipate the new situation. Albrecht Grözinger understands the "task of the sermon" precisely as "imagining people in the framework of God's possibilities."[50]

The term *imagination* brings another aspect into the picture. In literary science, linguistic philosophy and psychology, imagination and anticipation are described as having partly interchangeable functions. For our hypothesis that the sermon's linguistic anticipation of future conditions and situations can influence real conditions and situations, it is sufficient to summarise:

49 See Friedrich Niebergall, *Die moderne Predigt*, Tübingen, 1929, 170-191.

50 Albrecht Grözinger, *Praktische Theologie als Kunst der Wahrnehmung*, Gütersloh, Chr. Kaiser, 1995, 98.

anticipation or imaginary scenes and images are generally considered subversive. Indeed, as Jean-Paul Sartre put it, they are *temporary declarations of nullity* in relation to things as they are.[51] They create new world conditions and are in this sense necessary "acts of freedom."[52] How else could one hope to produce a sermon that does not only have a prehistory but also an effectual history? How could one design leeway in the sense described above without also imagining the opportunities it offers? Of course, the possibilities of the "new leeway" will be open only to those who really play—as in a chess game—and who gain experience in the process that can only be gained by playing; in other words, when the listeners are motivated and enabled to *enter into* the sermon. But the images and scenes needed for this will never come about unless they are formed by the preacher's "anticipating the possibilities of free play which they contain."[53]

3.3. Revealing creatureliness—preaching as an active subject

The accounts of creation explain, in part implicitly (Gen 1:18f.) and in part explicitly (Gen 2:19), that the creatures should assist and cooperate with the Creator in moulding the world. They will give names to animals and plants and, not least, to their own partners and thus call them from mere existence to enter a life context that allows them to live in community in freedom.[54] In this context we must think about what was meant above when we observed in passing that creation takes the form of creatures speaking to creatures. If God has equipped humans with "a relative power of their own" and expects them to "pass

51 According to Jean-Paul Sartre, the imaginary—at least when it is expressed—forms part of a very personal process of conceptualisation, but as the "néantisation" of existing circumstances it constitutes a reality of its own (cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'imaginaire. Psychol. phénoménol. de l'imagination*, Paris, 1940, 161.

52 R. Warning, 'Imagination,' in *HWP* 4 (1976), 217-220, here 220.

53 See Picht, 'Spielraum,' 644 f.

54 In a sermon on 1 Peter 4, dealing with participating in God's service to humankind, Luther states that we are "fellow workers, *non concreatores*" (*WA* 47, 857). See similar distinctions in his writing *De servo arbitrio* (*WA* 18, 754, 1-16).

on" what they have received "to other creatures and tell them about it,"[55] it can also be expected that preachers will make use of the creative competence they have been granted and respond in freedom with their sermons to the word that gave them life and brought them to the pulpit.

When attempting to describe "how that works," one may be inclined to argue more along the lines of incarnation theology or pneumatology. Then one can relate the transmission of the power to live to the "in, with and under" of sermon communication or attribute it to the hidden workings of the Holy Spirit. If one, nevertheless, looks for consequences in creation theology also for the person of the preacher, one first comes across appeals and stimuli for "*more creativity in the work of preaching*." These can be summarised as a call to approach the task of preaching in a more playful way,[56] to join in searching activities,[57] and to use a narrative form of preaching. Here it is not necessary to repeat all this or to criticise it. It is legitimate and also plausible in relation to creation theology for preachers to exploit their own creativity and to do whatever they can in this respect.

I am concerned here about something else. The preacher does not only foster preaching by doing what he *can* but also by becoming who he *is*, namely revealing that he is a creature. This implies, for example, that he does not try to set himself up as an example of the congruence between doctrine and life and instead sets an example by dealing with his sins in a way that differs from that of demi-gods,[58] by not hiding his errors in naming and judging people and things (see Gen 2:19f) but trusting the Creator to make corrections, because the preacher is aware that he is no better that other creatures in the spiritual sense. Is

55 Bayer, 'Schöpfung,' 338.

56 Andreas Horn, 'Der Text und sein Prediger. Hoffentlich entlastende Bemerkungen zu einer Phase der Predigtvorbereitung,' in *ZdZ* 37 (1983), 253-257.

57 Heribert Arens et al. (ed.), *Kreativität und Predigtarbeit, Vielseitiger denken, einfallsreicher predigen*, München, 1984[4].

58 Dietrich Stollberg, *Predigt praktisch. Homiletik—kurz gefaßt, mit 10 Predigtentwürfen*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979, 49, 53.

it expecting too much to link the ability of a sermon to transmit the power to live with the identity of the preacher as a creature, to call upon him to show that he is a creature and simultaneously to promise that just by doing so he will be able to speak more effectively?

The chapter on the person of the preacher is undoubtedly one of the most exciting in the history of homiletics and at this point, it is neither possible nor necessary to outline the struggle that continues even in our time to find an appropriate definition of the functions of "the preacher as active subject." But we can summarise what this lasting debate on the person of the preacher has contributed to our subject in the form of opportunity, problem, and task, namely: dealing with one's own creatureliness, learning to accept one's own person, taking leave of a false image of oneself, affirming one's own subjectivity, and so forth—these are all steps towards homiletic competence. When we say that preaching is a creative act in which the creature uses the medium of the Creator, namely language, to create leeway and transmit power to live, then the creature must be allowed to appear for what it is, that is, without holding anything back, in its whole unmistakable individuality. A sermon which is active in the sense of creation theology is not the result of degrees of restraint or "self-exclusion" of the preacher; it is the result of one hundred percent undisguised creatureliness and one hundred percent transmission of the creative word. The zero-to-one hundred models of homiletics, in which the preacher is merely a mouthpiece, are just as false as the fifty-fifty solutions, which claim that the statements of the text and one's own interest should be balanced in some kind of compromise.

A preacher who, in a figurative sense, disguises his creatureliness, who does not admit his view is limited by space and time, who covers up his own need of community with the Creator, will preach *ahistorically*. He will neither preach in a contemporary way, penetrating to the "reality of the present," nor be able to witness to the force of the creative word here and now. He needs self-realisation in the classical sense introduced into homiletics by Otto Haendler. In the homiletic process, "self-realisation" refers to the preacher's attempt, by means of mediating the text,

by facing up to his own fears and wishes, by conversations with other people, and so forth, to *appear before the congregation as an authentic subject*—not as a projection of himself or of the congregation. Understood in this way, self-realisation is the preacher's continuous struggle with his own creatureliness in the interest of the credibility of his witness.

The witness of the preacher to the congregation is a creative act in the original sense: called to life "from nothing" by the word of the Creator, the preacher turns to the hearers with nothing more than himself, but equipped with the word. What effect can he expect—provided he has engaged in this dialogue and now accepted his task of formulating "declarations of nullity" with his witness and pronouncing "words of power"? The reaction to this attempt appropriate to the event of creation would be the statement: "But that is...! Bone of my bone! Flesh of my flesh!" (Gen 2:23). The listener recognises the preacher as a related creature who cannot possess or transmit the power to live without first acquiring freedom and community. "But that is...!" This surprise indicates the moment when the hearer becomes aware of the leeway, receives the future, and reappears in the present opened up for him by the sermon.