

Learning to Picture God from Those Who Cannot See¹

Craig A. Satterlee

Axel Jacob and Gerda Maria (Swanson) Carlson Professor of Homiletics, Lutheran School of Theology

Abstract: *As preachers seek to address the visual character of our culture by including components the congregation must physically see in the sermon, the church's way of describing God is almost exclusively visual, and this emphasis on physically seeing God, or having physical sight as the frame of reference by which we experience God, contributes to the "fragmentation" of people who are blind—and, by implication, all people who live with disabilities—from the church, the faith, and from God, since they are not able to "picture" God as the church does when it gathers to worship. Craig A. Satterlee, a homiletician who is legally blind, proposes six ways preachers and congregations can learn to picture God from people who cannot see and bring that perspective to the sermon. Satterlee's suggestions are (1) ask people who cannot see how they "picture" God; (2) name people who cannot see as models of faith; (3) reimagine Scripture; (3) choose language carefully; (5) preach to all our senses; and (6) make the visual aspects of preaching auxiliary rather than essential.*

"Picturing God in a Fragmented World," the theme of the Ninth International Conference of Societas Homiletica held at Yale Divinity School in 2010, rightly acknowledges the visual character of our world, which many contemporary homileticians seek to address. For example, in *Envisioning the Word: The Use of Visual Images in Preaching*, Richard A. Jensen observes that we live in "a visual age." Jensen declares, "We live today in a world that stimulates our eyes and excites our sense of sight. Our culture seems intent on dazzling our eyes via television, the movies, the electric sights of our urban centers—and on our list could go. Eyes. Seeing."² Jensen urges that we attend more to the visual character of our age in the preaching process, and asks, "How can we make use of visualization in preaching for people who live in a strongly visual environment?"³ Jensen advocates for story-oriented sermons using film clips, and sermons structured around works of art presented with PowerPoint for all to view. More recent responses to our visual age include sending text messages to the preacher, which are projected on a screen during the sermon for the congregation to see, and broadcasting a single sermon simultaneously to several satellite congregations—even using holographic technology.⁴ In keeping with this visual perspective, the description of the Societas Homiletica conference eloquently spoke of "portraits" from recent meetings and compared the colors of our skin, hair, and eyes to the colors in a rainbow.⁵

At the conference, we were invited to "picture" God. The noun *picture* evokes paintings, drawings, portraits and photographs. We may think of television and movies. The verb *picture*

¹ This paper continues and expands upon Craig A. Satterlee, *When God Speaks through Worship: Stories Congregations Live By* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2009), 99-112 and idem, "'The Eye Made Blind by Sin': The Language of Disability in Worship," *Liturgy*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (April-June 2010): 33-41. Originally presented at Societas Homiletica 9th International Conference at Yale Divinity School, New Haven, CT, August 1-5, 2010.

² Richard A. Jensen, *Envisioning the Word: The Use of Visual Images in Preaching* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), x.

³ Ibid., 16.

⁴ See http://articles.cnn.com/2010-07-14/tech/virtual.preaching_1_high-def-sermons-pastor?_s=PM:TECH

⁵ <http://www.societas-homiletica.org/conference/upcoming/theme-invitation.html>

means to represent someone or something—in this case, God—in a picture or photograph, to form a mental image of God, and to describe God in a certain way. As a preacher, teacher of preaching, and, for that matter, child of God who is legally blind, I am increasingly concerned that, in our time, our “certain way” of describing God is almost exclusively visual, and that this emphasis on physically seeing God, or having physical sight as the frame of reference by which we experience God, contributes to the “fragmentation” of people who are blind—and, by implication, all people who live with disabilities—from the church, the faith, and from God, since they are not able to “picture” God as the church does when it gathers to worship. I certainly cannot speak for all people who live with disabilities, and I do not presume to express their diverse experiences in this article. Nor do I in any way want to “privilege” blindness over other disabilities. Rather, I hope that by examining prevailing practices and perceptions from my perspective as one who cannot see, preachers might become more sensitive to all people who live with disabilities and their experiences of God.

Picturing God in the Way We Worship

Today, the most important “picture,” both of God and God’s Reign, that we can offer people does not come from the television programs, computer screens, movie clips, or projected images that characterize our “visual age” but from how people experience God in Christ through preaching and worship.

The Sunday sermon is the principal means by which the church most closely relates the Christian faith to the daily lives of the vast majority of practicing Christians . . . In its worship the faith community is most aware of its identity as God’s people and its shared life in Christ . . . Praying together, singing favorite hymns, and simply being in the worship space together centers people in the gospel and reinforces the congregation’s sense of community.⁶

Even more important, “worship is the location where *God* carries out God’s mission.”⁷ I have come to understand Christian worship as a mighty river of God’s saving activity in Jesus Christ, which flows from the life and history of Israel through the saving work of Jesus and the mission of the early church as these events are proclaimed in Scripture, to the church’s worship.⁸ Christian worship, then, is God’s initiative and activity in human history and the world, as well as in our individual lives, before it is an activity of Christians or the church. Worship is a place where God’s liberating grace is already present and active in words and actions. God speaks and acts in and through the ritual of Christian worship to save, reconcile, and recreate humanity and all creation. The judgment and mercy of God, proclaimed and enacted in worship, signify God’s ultimate judgment and mercy for the world. Like a river flowing to the sea, God’s work of reconciliation, recorded in Scripture and accomplished in Christ, continues in the church’s worship and through worship overflows into the world. Since God speaks and acts in worship,

⁶ Craig A. Satterlee, *When God Speaks through You: How Faith Convictions Shape Preaching and Mission* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2007), 7.

⁷ Craig A. Satterlee, *When God Speaks through Worship: Stories Congregations Live By* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2009), 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

congregations ought to determine how what they say and do in worship “pictures” God for persons who cannot see.

Today, much Christian worship privileges sight over our other senses to the degree that people who cannot see well or at all cannot truly participate and are left with a negative “picture” of God. In some faith communities, worship leaders are selected so that “worship looks the way we want the church to look,” with little regard for whether worship sounds the way we want the church to sound. Whether published worship books, printed worship folders, or projected words and images, one must be able to see and even to read to fully participate. The situation is compounded when the convenience with which we can change and reproduce orders of worship, coupled with the desire for innovation, creativity, and expansive language, means that even words that those who cannot see have committed to memory—hymns, prayers, psalms and creed—are subject to change. At the same time, for people who cannot hear, the printed word can be a real gift. However, in many congregations, providing biblical texts in worship folders or projected on screens changed the reading of Scripture from the community gathered around the proclaimed Word to a gathering of individuals, all reading Scripture to themselves silently while someone reads Scripture aloud, often inaudibly and poorly. Under these circumstances, to receive the word of God in worship, one must be able to see it.

More than inhibiting their participation, we regularly say things in worship that “picture” God inaccurately by declaring a negative view of people who cannot see and, in fact, all people who live with disabilities. For example, we sing, “Gather us in, the lost and forsaken. Gather us in, the blind and the lame,” suggesting that people who cannot see or walk have gone astray and are lacking. Similarly, when God declares, “I, the Lord of wind and flame, I will tend the poor and lame. I will set a feast for them,” those who cannot walk are equated with the poor, all of whom will be taken care of, rather than being given an opportunity to take care of themselves. The words, “We are called to be hope for the hopeless so hatred and blindness will be no more,” regularly give me pause and cause me to wonder whether something that is so much a part of who I am will simply be swept away as an evil like hatred in the fullness of God’s Reign.⁹

In preaching we unconsciously use words related to disability, including *blind*, *deaf*, and *lame*, to describe negative behaviors, characteristics, and situations. We do not include the experiences and perspectives of people who do not see—or hear or walk—in our exegesis and proclamation of the disability passages and healing narratives found in Scripture. Kathy Black asserts: “How we preach the healing texts contributes greatly to the theology and general attitude that laypeople have towards persons with disabilities in general. Our interpretation of these texts also contributes to the exclusion of persons with disabilities from most of our churches today.”¹⁰

From the perspective of one who cannot see, emphasizing visual aspects in preaching, especially preaching that uses the language of blindness negatively and sight positively, pictures God in ways that are both unfortunate and untrue. On more than one occasion in worship, I have mused that perhaps the Reign of God will be like that worship service in which we were asked to stand, face the screen, and sing the words projected there: “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”¹¹ There was no place for people who could not see in that foretaste of the feast to come, and the God being proclaimed did not seem to notice or care. With these and similar experiences shaping my understanding of Christian worship, I—a Christian who is

⁹ Satterlee, *When God Speaks through Worship*, 104-107; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), #532, 574, 720.

¹⁰ Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 12.

¹¹ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #779.

legally blind—sometimes genuinely wonder whether someone who cannot see can be a Christian. Can people who cannot read be Christian? What kind of God are we “picturing” as we worship? What kind of “fragmentation” are we contributing to?

Richard Jensen writes, “When we add eyes as an important sense for the total sermon experience, we encounter one serious obstacle. Some members of our congregations are visually impaired. Such persons, precious in God’s sight, are incapable or marginally capable of ‘seeing’ our sermons.”¹² I greatly respect and appreciate Jensen’s candid observation, particularly over many others who present the use of visual technology in worship and preaching as the all-inclusive panacea that will save the church. Still, I am amused that Jensen calls people who are visually impaired “precious in God’s sight,” subtly emphasizing the difference between God who sees and we who do not.

Jensen observes that “some of our parishioners with visual disabilities are only partially disabled and could see our sermon if they had a handout of the visuals to be projected,” and “we could also consider assigning persons to sit with the visually impaired to interpret the visuals for them.” Dr. Jensen then recalls a conversation that he and I had about the use of projecting PowerPoint and visual images and including movie clips in preaching. Jensen writes: “One of my colleagues who is visually impaired makes the point that some weeks nothing will work for him and others. He will, finally, feel left out. We need to accept this reality even as we move ahead to prepare visual sermons.”¹³ Indeed, preachers and congregations can decide that there are limits to what they are willing and able to do to welcome and include people who cannot see in worship. Yet, accepting this reality and moving ahead to prepare visual sermons “pictures” a God who, with the preacher, accepts that people who cannot physically see feel left out of worship because they are prevented from participating in it and reinforces the church’s well-established portrait of a “god” who “looks” negatively on people who cannot see and, in fact, all people who live with disabilities.

Disability in Scripture and Christian Tradition

The church’s subtle yet pervasive understanding of disabilities, which I would summarize as the assertion that disabilities are caused by or are a consequence of sin, is certainly found in sacred Scripture, which, of course, is the mother tongue of Christian worship. In Exodus (4:11), for example, God says to Moses, “Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?” These words have been interpreted as proof that disabilities are the result of divine judgment, rather than that persons with disabilities are created in God’s image. Isaiah tells us that opening the eyes of the blind is a sign of the day of the Lord (29:18). Personally, I hope that God fulfills other signs first, such as cutting off those alert to do evil. Nevertheless, verses like these help to explain why blindness was equated with sin and divine judgment at the time of Jesus. “As Jesus walked along,” the fourth evangelist tells us, “he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’”¹⁴ The disciples’ question reveals their operating assumption: the man’s blindness is a consequence of sin, either his own or that of his parents.

The scriptural connection of disability and sin is not limited to blindness. For example, in Matthew’s Gospel (9:1-7), when Jesus saw some people carrying a man who was paralyzed lying

¹² Jensen, *Envisioning the Word*, x.

¹³ *Ibid.*, xi.

¹⁴ John 9:1-2.

on a bed and recognized their faith, Jesus said to this man, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.” Then, when some of the scribes said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming,” Jesus responded, “Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” —he then said to the man who was paralyzed— “Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.” And the man stood up and went to his home.” Though Jesus takes away the man’s paralysis to prove to the scribes that he has the authority to forgive sins, this passage has been interpreted as indicating that Jesus firmly established a connection between this man’s paralysis and his sinfulness, and by implication, disability and sin.

These stories are but a small sample. There are, in fact, twenty-six passages and stories about people with disabilities in the Gospels alone.¹⁵ Throughout its history, the church has interpreted scriptural passages, images, and stories that include persons with disabilities in ways that subtly or explicitly reinforce the assertion that physical and developmental disabilities are caused by or are a consequence of sin and may even be God’s punishment visited upon the sinner. This hermeneutic approach assumes that getting rid of their disabilities is the chief concern of people who are disabled and the ideal for all people. Today, the church does well to question this assumption since many people with disabilities report that they have larger and more pressing hopes and concerns than getting rid of their disabilities. Alternatively, the church does not address disabilities at all but instead uses the person being healed in the biblical text as an object to make some other point, rather than as the subject or agent of his or her own history. The problem with this approach is that persons with disabilities today likewise find themselves treated as objects to be dealt with by health care, social services, education, employment, and the church.¹⁶

The hermeneutic approach that equates disability and sin and persons with disabilities as objects also perpetuates the marginalization, even fragmentation, of persons with disabilities by reinforcing rather than challenging the biblical portrait of people with disabilities as marginalized. For example, except for Bartimaeus, the other people with disabilities in the Gospels are nameless, an indication in the ancient world of a complete lack of social standing. Most people with disabilities in the Gospels are poor, unemployed, beggars, or servants, and therefore marginalized economically. The church perpetuates the marginalization of persons with disabilities when, for example, it speaks of these biblical characters primarily in terms of their disability. For example, the man born blind becomes the blind man and the woman with a hemorrhage becomes the bleeding woman.

Finally, these passages are often interpreted as suggesting a connection between the personal faith of a person with a disability and healing; if a person with a disability has faith, he or she is healed. The unspoken corollary of this connection is that the presence of a disability indicates lack of faith, moral imperfection, even sin. In these ways, this interpretative approach, if not the biblical stories and images themselves, encourages those who read and hear Scripture, particularly in worship, to think that there is a connection between sin, illness, and disability; therefore, there is something inherently wrong with being disabled. The belief that there is something fundamentally wrong with being disabled contributes to the oppression and fragmentation of people with disabilities in the worshiping community as well as the world.

¹⁵ Black, *A Healing Homiletic*, is an excellent resource for preaching on these passages.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

Learning to Picture God from People Who Cannot See

Today, people with disabilities reject the notion that disabilities are caused by or are a consequence of sin. On the contrary, people with disabilities are bold to say that they are created in the image of God.¹⁷ We contend that there is nothing wrong with being disabled: “there is no pity or tragedy in disability and that it is society’s myths, fears and stereotypes that most make being disabled difficult.”¹⁸ Many people with disabilities, including me, *enjoy* full and fulfilling lives. For those who will “see” it, we repudiate the medical model of disability, which views us as sick and in need of cure, the mechanical model of disability, which views us as broken and in need of repair, and the theological model of disability, which views us as more profound sinners in greater need of forgiveness than people without disabilities. Like everyone else, people with disabilities seek equality, independence, dignity, full inclusion, the opportunity to contribute, and that our contributions be recognized and valued. In fact, some people who cannot see or hear or walk do not understand themselves as disabled in any way. The word that we long to hear from the pulpit is that, rather than objects of ministry and healing or consequences of sin, the church embraces persons with disabilities as partners in ministry and models of faith. I often recall Jesus’ answer to the disciples when they asked, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” “Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.’”¹⁹

If preachers agree that, in the Reign of God, people with disabilities enjoy equality, independence, dignity, full inclusion, and the opportunity to contribute in recognizable and valuable ways, they can proclaim the nearness of God’s Reign to persons with disabilities by learning to picture God in a fragmented world from people who cannot see or hear or walk or talk or any of the other things that we call disabilities. Preachers can learn to “picture” God from people who cannot see by (1) asking people who cannot see how they “picture” God; (2) naming people who cannot see as models of faith; (3) reimagining Scripture; (3) choosing language carefully; (5) preaching to all our senses; and (6) making the visual aspects of preaching auxiliary rather than essential. Obviously, some of these suggestions are transferable when preachers want to learn now, for example, people who cannot hear listen to God or people who cannot move walk with Jesus. Of course, if preachers believe that disabilities are caused by or are a consequence of sin, an indication of lack of faith, or divine judgment, they should paint this picture of God honestly so that persons with disabilities can respond appropriately, perhaps by finding a different preacher and faith community or, as happens too often, by leaving the church altogether.

Ask People Who Cannot See How They “Picture” God

As simple as it sounds, ask someone who cannot see how he or she “pictures” God. Ask someone who cannot see how not seeing informs their faith and shapes their experience of God. Invite someone who cannot see to share how he or she interprets a passage of Scripture. These conversations can be very frightening, which is probably why so few preachers initiate them. Engaging in conversation about the theological meaning of blindness—or any disability—may

¹⁷ Genesis 1:26.

¹⁸ Joseph P. Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Random House, 1994), 5.

¹⁹ John 9:3.

even cause some preachers and members of the congregation a “crisis of understanding.”²⁰ A crisis of understanding occurs when people question the existence, identity and nature of God. Confronted by a crisis of understanding, people often find themselves lost in a spiraling stream of consciousness in which one unanswered question leads to another. In terms of disability, people might ask where God is in disability. Are people with disabilities really created in God’s image? If so, what does that say about God? Will people be disabled in heaven or in the Reign of God, or will it simply not matter? People might question God’s will—would God intentionally create someone with a disability? Why would God do this? When God does not seem to act in the way people think God should or would, people often question the truth of God’s very existence.

Personally, I do not believe that my blindness was caused by or are a consequence of sin, or that it is a sentence of divine judgment. Nor do I believe that God intentionally created me legally blind in order to inspire people who can see. I hold that my blindness is a consequence of the fallen state of creation, that all people are created in God’s image, and that, in Christ Jesus, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”²¹

Of course, for these conversations to be possible, Christian congregations will need to understand themselves as what John S. McClure calls a “community of repair.”²² In such communities, preaching clears a space for freedom for repair in which persons with disabilities—and all who are marginalized—can speak the truth of their experience and the congregation can receive that truth in the assurance that the response will be forgiveness rather than broken relationship. When possible, these conversations can help overcome what McClure describes as the violent, self-perpetuating rhythm between the so-called “center” and “margins.”²³ John McClure is correct that, in a community of repair, we are always handing one another tools—new language, new perspectives, and new understandings—for making the community more inclusive and “other-wise” or “wise about the human other of all stripes.”²⁴ The key to conversations with persons who cannot see or hear or walk or talk is to be open to repair, and to receive the “tools” they offer eagerly and graciously, even if it is sometimes very difficult.²⁵

Name People Who Cannot See as Models of Faith

A second way that we can learn to picture God from people who cannot see is by approaching and preaching about biblical accounts of people who cannot see not as sick people in need of healing, sinners in need of forgiving, or object lessons that allegorically point to something else, but as models of faith to be emulated. I must confess that I take great delight in the fact that Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52), who cannot see, has great insight and may even be a model for followers who claim 20/20 vision. Bartimaeus calls Jesus, “Son of David,” echoing what the crowds will say when Jesus enters Jerusalem: “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our

²⁰ Joseph R. Jeter, Jr., *Crisis Preaching: Personal and Public* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 38-39.

²¹ Romans 8:28.

²² John S. McClure, Nashville, TN, February 17, 2010, email to Craig A. Satterlee, Chicago, IL.

²³ John S. McClure, “Preaching and the Redemption of Language,” in Jana Childers (ed.), *The Purposes of Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 86.

²⁴ McClure, email to Craig A. Satterlee.

²⁵ See John S. McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice press, 2001), 133-152.

ancestor David.” Despite his blindness, Bartimaeus sees what others who met Jesus do not—that Jesus is the Messiah.

Bartimaeus does what the man with many possessions cannot. Bartimaeus casts aside his cloak, his most treasured possession, the thing that kept him warm through cold nights, and the place where Bartimaeus kept the meager spoils of his begging. Bartimaeus threw off his cloak, leaving his former life behind. And once Jesus restores his sight, Bartimaeus follows Jesus “on the way.” Bartimaeus testifies to the life-altering consequences of receiving sight from Jesus. Once Jesus brings the good news of God’s Reign to bear in our lives in tangible ways, we can do nothing but follow Jesus.

Yet, I consider Bartimaeus a model of faith most of all because Bartimaeus begs Jesus for the help he needs. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Bartimaeus begs. The crowds, who would silence him, do not dissuade Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus persists until his pleas are heard. Bartimaeus calls Jesus out. He understands that being restored to honor, productivity, and well-being requires the mercy of the one whom he knows as Son of David. And so Bartimaeus is not afraid to ask for mercy. Bartimaeus is not ashamed to beg for it. And Jesus names Bartimaeus’ begging as faith. Bartimaeus gives me pause as I take in that to be faithful in some seasons of our lives, and in some seasons of the life of our church, might mean that, rather than figuring it out for ourselves, we beg Jesus to have mercy on us. For those who will consider his relationship to Jesus, Bartimaeus becomes a model of faith *before* Jesus restores his sight.

Re-imagine Scripture

A third way that we can learn to picture God from people who cannot see is to re-imagine the characters, language, and images found in Scripture. Inasmuch as the experiences and perspectives of people with disabilities are not included in our exegesis and proclamation of even the disability passages and healing narratives, we need to re-imagine Scripture in ways that takes these perspectives and experiences into account. Preachers can begin by focusing on the personality, behavior, or some trait other than the biblical character’s disability and approaching her or him as someone who has something to tell or teach us, rather than someone whom we pity.

Turning to biblical language, preachers can “negate” what John S. McClure calls “the capturing and enslavement of words and symbols by the principalities and powers”²⁶ by asking ourselves how particular words will sound to particular members of our congregation. For example, Scripture proclaims that “God is light, and in God there is no darkness at all.”²⁷ Being legally blind, I know firsthand that to “walk in the light”²⁸ often hurts. I wear sunglasses both to darken my world so that I can function and to protect my eyes from the light. Scholars say that everyone in the ancient world agreed that God is light. But this premise plays differently to people for whom the light of day does not automatically bring safety and the darkness of night does not automatically signal danger. So we might re-imagine *darkness* and *light* as ways of understanding God’s nature.²⁹

Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus in John 3 flips ancient understanding of darkness and light when preachers commend “Nick at Nite” as a spiritual role model, saying that nighttime is

²⁶ McClure, “Preaching and the Redemption of Language,” in *The Purposes of Preaching*, 83.

²⁷ 1 John 1:5.

²⁸ 1 John 1:7.

²⁹ This example was previously published as Craig A. Satterlee, “Living by the Word: Groping in Darkness,” *The Christian Century*, Vol. 123 No. 8 (April 18, 2006): 20.

the right time to bring our biggest questions and deepest concerns to Jesus. Rather than providing a cloak of secrecy that covers fear, the dark of night brings clarity and calm as our lives slow and our most important questions surface. In this case something that was obvious to the ancients is ambiguous to us. Fortunately, the author of I John does not leave “God is light” unaddressed. Later in the letter, “the message that we received . . . and proclaim to you” is further defined. The message heard from the beginning is that “we should love one another.”³⁰ The author asserts that God is love (4:8, 16). In Jesus, God is revealed as light and as love, and this revelation includes the commandment to love one another. To say that God is light is to say that God is love. To walk in the light is to love one another.

We walk in the light when we love one another enough to allow the power of Christ’s resurrection to breathe new life into well-established theological words like *darkness* and *light*. Often the first step of walking in the light by loving one another is to grope in the darkness of resurrection. When the risen Christ resurrects the phrase “God is light,” for example, we may at first find ourselves plunged into holy darkness as former things pass away. But we will experience God in the darkness, as surely as Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was (Exod. 20:21). With the psalmist, we discover that darkness is not the absence of God, but God’s secret place. Groping in the darkness of resurrection, we come to know that asserting that God’s nature is light may not be wrong, but it is as limiting as asserting that God’s nature is masculine. In fact, rather than describing that nature of God at all, “God is light” is one way of describing God’s loving relationship with humanity, as revealed in God’s saving action in Jesus Christ.

Experiencing God as darkness makes determining how to walk in the light less certain than we might suspect or desire. Since to walk in the light is to love one another, any prescription that absolutizes light as good and darkness as evil walks away from love rather than walking in it. Instead of prompting us to cling to the certainty of the light that we know, Christ’s resurrection sets us to the holy work of groping in the darkness of resurrection. Perhaps this is why Isaiah praises those who walk in darkness by trusting in and relying on God rather than lights of their own.

Choose Language Carefully

I suspect that preachers do not need to be convinced of the power of the words spoken in sermons and worship services to shape people’s faith and their understanding of God. The words we use in worship teach us how to praise God and proclaim who God is to others; these words can also increase faith, build up the faith community, and teach us how to pray.³¹ The words we use in worship help us name, claim, enter into, and work for God’s coming Reign, in the world as well as in the age to come. Most important, God speaks to us in and through the words we use in worship.

I contend that, as an extension of God’s reconciling love and a reflection of and participation in the gospel, the words we speak in worship about people with disabilities are at their best when they foster a “theology of access,” which ensures that people with disabilities take their rightful place within the Christian community as beloved, gifted, and called children of

³⁰ 1 John 3:11.

³¹ Satterlee, *When God Speaks through Worship*, 99-104.

God and members of Christ's body.³² Speak of persons rather than disabilities to avoid reducing persons to their disabilities. Do not use language that sensationalizes and dramatizes being disabled and contributes to making people with disabilities "other." "Do not reduce a person's experience of embodiment to metaphor."³³ Do not use either words related to disability to describe negative behaviors, characteristics, and situations or slang to describe persons with disabilities. In fact, only speak of a person's disability when it is relevant to the conversation. Finally, avoid trivializing disability by making it a universal experience: "She cannot walk and I cannot play piccolo. We all have our disabilities." In these ways, we truthfully speak of our God, who welcomes persons with disabilities as beloved, gifted, and called children and members of Christ's body.

Preach to All Our Senses

As we study, prepare sermons, and preach, we can learn to "picture" God from people who cannot see by using our other senses. Some passages of Scripture are best understood and interpreted using a sense other than sight. In John's Gospel, both the raising of Lazarus and Mary anointing Jesus are odorous experiences.³⁴ We preach on Psalm 42:1, "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God," by appealing to people's thirst rather than projecting an image of a doe by a brook. The words of Jesus take on many different meanings when we imagine how they sounded. Consider, for example, when Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"³⁵ Did Jesus emphasize *why*, *me*, or another word? Scripture read thoughtfully and well in worship can itself be a proclamation of who God is and an experience of grace.

What is true for Scripture is equally true for experience and illustration. Receiving communion is about holding and tasting bread and wine. Baptism is about feeling wet. We can talk about the warmth of the sun on our faces as well as the beauty of a sunrise or sunset. Preachers and worship leaders can help people who cannot see experience God by endeavoring to make worship multisensory and by seeking out and including descriptions of smells, tastes, sounds and textures in sermons, as well as sights.

Make the Visual Components of Preaching Auxiliary

Richard Jensen is right. Preachers and congregations can provide handouts of everything that is projected and assign someone to describe what is on the screen, and be satisfied that they have done everything they can to include people who cannot see in worship geared to our "visual age," except for the fact that preachers and congregations can do at least two more things.

First, the reason that "some weeks nothing will work for [me] and others" is that, after a long week of living in our "visual age," we do not need the Christian assembly to be one more place where we cannot be independent, are expected to graciously accept the help that others think we need, and get over the fact that we feel left out. Preachers and congregations should not make decisions that affect people with disabilities without including them in the decision-making process. The person best able to help the preacher decide what to do about someone who cannot

³² Jennie Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 11.

³³ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁴ See John 11:39; 12:3.

³⁵ Mark 15:34.

see the screen is the person who will be sitting in church not seeing the screen. Some weeks a handout or an oral description may suffice; other weeks, the person may choose to stay home. Involving people with disabilities in decision-making that affects them and respecting their contribution “pictures” a God that includes, values, and respects them.

Second, preachers and worship planners can make the resources of our visual age auxiliary rather than essential to worship. Use the projected image or film clip to inform or reinforce the message, rather than making them the sermon’s foundation or focus to such a degree that the message is lost to those who cannot see the visual component. Describe rather than allude to the visual component in the sermon. Commit to hearing, smelling, touching and tasting God, as well as “picturing” God, as a way of participating in God’s own mission of reconciling our fragmented world.