

# The preacher as tour guide: Becoming better curators of the biblical text

Tim MacBride

Recently there has been a lively discussion in Evangelical Homiletics circles over the critique of Haddon Robinson’s “Big Idea” methodology<sup>1</sup> set forth in Abraham Kuruvilla’s provocatively-titled article, “Time to kill the Big Idea? A fresh look at preaching.”<sup>2</sup> Essentially, Kuruvilla has revived the objections previously raised by key figures in the so-called New Homiletic,<sup>3</sup> epitomised by Fred Craddock’s memorable characterisation of the Big Idea approach as one in which “the minister boils off all the water and then preaches the stain in the bottom of the cup.”<sup>4</sup> Kuruvilla argues that the process of distilling the text into a Big Idea is, by definition, reductionistic; the particulars of the text are lost when the ideas are extracted from the text in which they were given. What is then preached is the distillate, in propositional form, rather than the text itself, with all of its nuances, emotion, and rhetorical force. The alternative Kuruvilla puts forward is the image of a preacher as “curator” of the text, highlighting its features and revealing what the biblical author is “doing with what he is saying.”<sup>5</sup> To put it simply (at the risk of being an over-reduction!), he encourages preachers to ensure the biblical text is front-and-centre, rather than relegating it to being a source of “proofs” for the Big Idea—and all of the smaller ideas—of the sermon. The story of the text should be the main story, rather than providing a series of propositional pegs upon which to hang our own stories.

While the broad thrust of Kuruvilla’s critique is not new, it appears that its unexpected source—a voice from within evangelicalism rather than from mainline

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Protestant homileticians—elicited a vigorous response, with swift rebuttals from Steven Mathewson and Russell St John.<sup>6</sup> The former argued that Big Idea preaching, when “done properly,” does in fact do much of what Kuruvilla was advocating.<sup>7</sup> In the case of the latter, the objection seemed to hinge on whether the theological content of the inspired text can or should be separated from the manner in which it is expressed.<sup>8</sup> Irrespective of the merits of such critiques, Kuruvilla has succeeded in sparking further conversation among evangelicals around matters of textual pragmatics and the homiletical use of the biblical text.

All this is by way of background to set the present discussion in its context. I do not intend to contribute here to the debate itself, although elsewhere I have argued along lines similar to that of Kuruvilla for a greater emphasis on the rhetorical function of biblical texts as being essential to faithful exposition.<sup>9</sup> (I advocate the preaching of the rhetoric of the text itself rather than imposing a propositional rhetoric regardless of its genre and purpose.) Instead, I will take as a starting point the call for preachers to be better “curators” of the biblical text—regardless of whether we are persuaded to kill the Big Idea entirely, or simply to breathe new life into it through curbing its tendency towards reductionism. What follows, then, is not a scholarly discussion, although it emerges from one. Rather, it is drawn from a reflection on the praxis of expository preaching,<sup>10</sup> suggesting ways in which we as preachers might be more effective “tour guides” as we help others experience the biblical text: how it is read aloud in our gatherings; how we might engage with the text in our preaching in a manner that brings it to life for our congregations; and how we might creatively bridge the world of the text and the world of our hearers. It is largely example driven, and intended to spark further reflection and creativity, rather than to be the final word on the matter.

### **The public reading of Scripture**

In many church traditions, the public reading of Scripture is a high point of the service; the reading from the Gospels involves a solemn procession as the congregation stands to hear it read aloud. In my low-church, Baptist experience, this sense of reverence has often slipped somewhat; sometimes the reading commands all the attention of the opening production company credits prior to the start of the movie proper. Perhaps flowing from a hopefully-not-misplaced evangelical confidence that the main event, the sermon, will explain it all to us (or at least a distillate thereof), members of the congregation will still be flipping through to find the page, navigating the Bible app on their phones while trying to avoid the distraction of social media notifications, or paying half attention as they try to follow the rush of words and images whose origins are half a world and two millennia away. Yet, much of the time, preachers seem to assume that their

audience has, by virtue of this reading, experienced the text, so that the sermon itself only needs to recall a few of its highlights by way of illustration or proof.

A better curation of the text at least begins with a more considered public reading. This does not necessarily involve processions and incense, but it requires two obvious yet important elements: training and framing.

First, good public reading requires some training. In my low-church background we have seen (rightly, in my view) the reading of Scripture as something anyone should be able to do. Yet we have often neglected to provide rudimentary instruction, assuming that functional literacy is all that is required. Ideally, we would train readers to recognise the parallelism of Hebrew poetry; to plot the logic behind Paul's argument so that phrasing and emphases are placed most helpfully; to read a story as an engaging narrator; and to deliver dialogue as dialogue. Importantly, we should give people time to prepare during the week rather than have the task of reading thrust upon them simply because they arrived for the service a little early.

Second, for a twenty-first century congregation to understand the ancient text being read, there must be a certain amount of framing. David Buttrick advised that a sermon introduction ought to provide a "hermeneutical orientation"<sup>11</sup> so that the audience knew how they were expected to experience the ensuing sermon. Likewise, many readings require a similar orientation if the congregation is to listen profitably, noting the original audience of the text, the place in salvation history to which it speaks, and the context of the passage within the larger work. This can be done in several ways: the preacher can provide such an orientation prior to the text's being read; the preacher can provide the reader with such an orientation to deliver as a preamble; or the reading itself can be a "move" or scene *within the sermon*, perhaps after the introduction and setting of context, and read by the preacher or designated reader.

This last option I have found to be most helpful when the original context is most foreign. In a four-week series through Ezekiel 33–37, for example, the reading each week was the third scene in the sermon. It was preceded by an introduction foreshadowing the contemporary relevance of the passage, followed by a reminder of the historical situation—how the text is *not* directly addressing us as God's people, but that we are its goal, its completion. At that point, I trust, the congregation was sufficiently oriented to hear the text properly.

## **Have a conversation with the text**

Moving beyond the formal reading of the biblical text, there are creative ways in which tour-guide preachers can showcase more of the text within the sermon itself. One that I have found particularly helpful is to engage with the text as a

conversation partner, giving voice to how the congregation might hear, question, struggle with,<sup>12</sup> and ultimately obey the text.<sup>13</sup> This models for our hearers more than just a passive approach to reading Scripture, encouraging greater interaction with the text directly, rather than just through the proxy of the sermon. What follows are some suggestions on how to have such a conversation.<sup>14</sup>

1. Be surprised by something unusual or surprising. By the time our sermon is being delivered, the text should (we hope) no longer be a surprise to us. Yet this should not prevent us from voicing surprise at something we ought to find surprising, or curiosity at something we ought to identify as being unusual. For example:

Matt 1:1–3 This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David. . . Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar. . . *Whoa! There's the first woman. Tamar. What's she doing there? Particularly when there were some more famous Bible wives who don't get mentioned. Abraham's wife, Sarah. Or Isaac's wife, Rebekah. They don't make it into this particular family scrapbook. But Tamar does. Why?*

This frequently involves voicing the reaction of the original audience of the text, which may not otherwise be ours.

Matt 9:10 While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house. . . *He's at his house? I mean, even these days we don't share a meal with just anyone. But in the first century, eating with someone was a sign of acceptance. Jesus, this supposed holy man, was hanging out with lowlife. And while he was there. . . many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples.*

In a less dramatic way, we might simply draw attention to something seemingly insignificant that is significant:

Matt 5:1–2 Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them. *Why does Matthew draw attention to the fact that Jesus went up to a mountain to teach them? What might this be saying about Jesus? Does it remind us of someone else who once went up a mountain to get instructions about how to live as the people of God?*

2. Help people find a familiar text as shocking as it should be. Sometimes a text will be so familiar to us that its shocking nature is overlooked. As curators, we can remind the audience of how it ought to be experienced. We could begin a sermon on the end of Matthew chapter 5 thus:

*Were you all listening to the last verse of the bible reading just now? I'm guessing not, as I didn't hear any audible gasps, so let me run it by you again: Matt 5:48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Don't you find that confronting—even shocking? Jesus sums up his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount thus far simply by saying "be perfect." Perfect? Come on, Jesus! You've just announced that the kingdom of God has come: that it's good news for the poor, the meek; blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. You've built us all up, and now you say—oh, by the way, did I forget to tell you? Be perfect! How is that good news?*

3. Make explanatory asides as you read. Earlier, I noted that we could provide any required framing prior to the reading of the text. An alternative is to embed that framing as we read out each portion of the text by way of explanatory asides. This may well have been what Ezra was doing as he read from the Book of the Law, "making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read" (Neh 8:8). It was also a common rabbinic practice known as *targum*, providing commentary and interpretation as they translated from the Hebrew.<sup>15</sup> In doing this, we should not be afraid of breaking into the flow of the reading—especially if the congregation is either following the text in their own Bibles or the text is being projected as we read, so that a clear distinction can be made between our words and God's. Some examples:

Ezek 37:9–14 "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man . . . I will put my Spirit in you— *the Hebrew word for "breath" is the same as the word for "spirit"*—and you will live."

Later in the same sermon: John 5:27–29 "And [the Father] has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves—you mean, like a valley full of dry bones?—will hear his voice—*perhaps, the voice of the son of man prophesying?*—and

come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.”

Ezek 37:15–17 The word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, take a stick of wood and write on it, ‘Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him.’ *That is: the southern kingdom, who later became the Jews.* Then take another stick of wood, and write on it, ‘Belonging to Joseph (that is, to Ephraim) and all the Israelites associated with him.’ *These are the northern tribes who got scattered back in the eighth century.* Join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand.”

4. Frame the text before or after each verse. Sometimes explanatory asides are not sufficient. An alternative is to frame each short section or verse by explaining briefly what it means. This is useful for getting quickly through large amounts of text (most frequently, narrative) for which brief explanation is needed to comprehend what is being said, but the application relates to the whole. It can be prior to reading each verse:

*Instead, Israel keeps looking to the big world powers for security:*  
Hosea 7:11 Ephraim is like a dove, easily deceived and senseless—now calling to Egypt, now turning to Assyria.

*For this reason, God will destroy them:* 7:12–13a Woe to them, because they have strayed from me! Destruction to them, because they have rebelled against me!

*God wants to restore his people, but they’re too busy trying to get the attention of their idols to help them instead:* 7:13b–14 I long to redeem them but they speak about me falsely. . . They slash themselves, appealing to their gods for grain and new wine, but they turn away from me.

Or it can be immediately afterwards:

Hosea 6:1–2 “Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence.” *Israel is being presumptuous about God’s forgiveness. A bit like an abusive husband returning for the hundredth time, promising he won’t*

*do it again—and resigning himself to spending a couple of nights on the couch; three at most. But God's not that easily fooled.*

6:4 What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears. *Your “repentance” is going to last as long as it did the previous hundred times! That’s why this time it’s going to be different.*

5. Query the rationale of the text. This may involve inviting people to consider the reason for a command, before going on to explain it:

Lev 19:9–10 “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. . . Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God.” *Why was this law given, particularly in a world where foreigners were very much seen as the enemy, far more so than is the case even today? Why was Israel to care for the poor and the foreigner?*

We can ask why a character in a narrative did or said something, again as a precursor to providing an explanation:

Matt 9:3 At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, “This fellow is blaspheming!” *How is this blasphemy? Saying someone’s sins are forgiven—how is that a problem?*

A more extended version of this approach may be to have a dialogue or even an argument with the text, as we model how to wrestle with, for example, its strangeness or its challenging implications. As part of this process, we consider what the “stumbling blocks” might be to the congregation’s understanding of, or agreement to, or obedience to the text.<sup>16</sup> Rather than ignore them, we model how to work through them, much how diatribe functions in epistles, for example.

6. Draw out the diatribe. There are numerous instances of diatribe in Scripture, in which the author engages in dialogue with an imaginary interlocutor. We can enhance its effect as we read:

James 2:18a But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” *Surely faith and actions can be separated? One person might*

*have faith, another might do good works. Either is acceptable. It's all good.*

*But no, says James, they're inseparable. And he challenges his opponent: 2:18b Show me your faith without deeds. But you can't, can you? But 2:18c I will show you my faith by my deeds. I'll make my faith evident through my actions and behaviour. Belief by itself is meaningless, worthless.*

*James continues his imaginary dialogue by referring to the fundamental statement of Jewish faith, taken from Deuteronomy chapter 6: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." James uses this as an example of faith; he imagines that his opponent believes this: 2:19a You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. Good for you, says James. Even the demons believe that—and they shudder at the thought. Their belief at least impacts their behaviour. But does yours?*

7. Respond to the face-value reading, before explaining. Texts will often seem strange or absurd on first reading; we can acknowledge that before providing an explanation.

Matt 9:15–17 “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? . . .

*No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined." I'm sorry, how does that relate? Don't lament, but rejoice, because God has sent me! Uh, now be careful how you mend your clothes and store your wine. . . ?*

Matt 5:39 But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. *I've always thought this verse was a pretty harsh call of Jesus, maybe because I'm not all that good with physical pain. Or defending myself. If someone punches me on the cheek, the only other cheek I'll be turning to them is the kind on display as I run away. But it's not violence that's actually in view here. The key is to note*



*that it's the right cheek that gets struck. If the person who hit you was right-handed, it would mean that they had slapped you across the face with the back of their hand. It wasn't so much the physical injury that was the problem, but the insult to your honour. Jesus, then, is primarily asking us not to retaliate when someone insults us.*

Matt 8:21 Another disciple said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." *It'll take some time, as I'm still in the interview phase for a suitable hit man. No, not like that. This may well refer to his obligation to look after his aging parents until their death. Then—once he's free from any family obligations—only then will he leave everything and follow Jesus.*

### **Bridge the world of the text and the world of the audience**

The final suggested approach to being more effective tour-guides is to build more accessible bridges between the world of the text and the world of our audience. This has always been a challenge for preachers, given the vast distances in time, culture, imagery, and language; decreasing biblical literacy has only served to exacerbate the sense of unfamiliarity. Explanation can help our understanding of a text, but it is not always capable of communicating the *experience* using ideas and images that speak directly to contemporary hearers. It can even intensify the sense of there being two separate worlds.<sup>17</sup>

One technique that can help to bridge this gap is the use of what might be termed "micro-illustrations." This is where we use words or brief images that translate the text into the contemporary world, often by deliberate anachronism.<sup>18</sup> These micro-illustrations allow our use of the text to stand with one foot in each world, making what is happening in the text more relatable and engaging—even humorous, as we recognise similarities with our own world, or smile at cultural differences—often reducing the need for as many illustrations of the traditional kind. Importantly, it can already begin applying the text while we are still in the act of reading it. Below is a number of examples:

Isa 1:22 Your silver has become dross, your choice wine is diluted with water. *Or as my translation puts it: Your coffees are all decaf soy lattes.*

Matt 8:20 Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." *Our neighbours have dens—plus four bedrooms, two and a half bathrooms, formal*

*lounge/dining, with a rumpus out the back; our workmates have nest eggs—in a diversified, medium-risk, managed portfolio; but the Son of Man has no retirement savings plan.*

Luke 12:19 And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." *Retire early. Live for pleasure. Get some hideous pants and play golf.*

Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also *pollute the oceans with the plastic bottle it came in?*

Sam 11:1 In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army. . . But David remained in Jerusalem. *Instead of going off to war like kings do, he chucks a sickie so he can spend some quality time on the couch binging every season of "Better Kill Saul."*

Mark 10:37 They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." *We'll back your leadership coup; then James can be Treasurer and John can take Foreign Affairs.*

Matt 21:8–9 "A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" *"Make Jerusalem Great Again."*

Cor 12:21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" *The service leader can't say to the sound guy, "I don't need you." And the youth leader most assuredly can't say to the cleaner, "I don't need you."*

## Conclusion

This article has only scratched the surface of what it might mean, in practical terms, to become better curators of the biblical text: reading it effectively, conversing with it throughout the sermon, and building bridges between its world and our own. Some of the suggestions may prove helpful, while others may simply not suit certain preaching styles. The aim, here, has been modest: to provoke

thought about how to bring the biblical text to the fore so that our hearers will have an encounter with the text itself—in all of its dimensions—rather than just our distillate. As Kuruvilla puts it, we are to “privilege the text!”<sup>19</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), is the founding text for the Big Idea method.
- 2 Abraham Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea? A Fresh Look at Preaching,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 61, no. 4 (2018).
- 3 For example, Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, third ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 122, argues that “to craft a sermon that logically presents the big ideas of the text to hearers is not the same thing as designing a sermon as a piece of drama intended to precipitate a powerful and life-changing experience.” Kuruvilla opens his article with this quote.
- 4 Fred Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1985), 123.
- 5 Abraham Kuruvilla, *A Manual for Preaching: The Journey from Text to Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 6–7, 30–31.
- 6 Steven D. Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live! A Response to Abraham Kuruvilla,” *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 19, no. 1 (2019); Russell St John, “Big Ideas and Bad Ideas,” *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 20, no. 1 (2020). More generally, Kuruvilla’s explicit focus on the how the theology of each unique pericope of Scripture functions to conform its readers to the image of Christ—which he has termed “Christiconic Preaching”—has met with praise for what it affirms, and some cautions about what it leaves unsaid, from traditional Big Idea preachers such as Bryan Chapell, “Response to Abraham Kuruvilla,” in *Homiletics and Hermeneutics: Four Views on Preaching Today*, ed. Scott M. Gibson and Matthew D. Kim (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 71–73.

- 7 I agree that many preachers trained in the Big Idea model have instinctively incorporated much of Kuruvilla's approach, as I have done. However, in my evaluation, the model as set out by Robinson—particularly with its Subject-Complement structure—has an inherent bias to privilege content at the expense of function, and the propositional distillate over the text itself.
- 8 St John, "Big Ideas and Bad Ideas," 7–8.
- 9 Tim MacBride, *Catching the Wave: Preaching the New Testament as Rhetoric* (Nottingham: IVP, 2016). This may involve the preacher's making use of the classical rhetorical forms, or parts thereof, if the biblical text itself makes use of such forms; or it may involve the rejection of them in favour of preaching forms which are more appropriate to the genre of the text.
- 10 I have elsewhere defined expository preaching not in terms of delivery style (e.g. a verse-by-verse exposition), but more broadly as any sermon which seeks "to say *and do* what the text says *and does*," regardless of its form. See Tim MacBride, *Preaching the New Testament as Rhetoric: The Promise of Rhetorical Criticism for Expository Preaching* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 6.
- 11 David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), 83. Providing a hermeneutical orientation is also the function of the introduction to this article, for example—especially the third paragraph.
- 12 Paul Scott Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching*, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007), 70, laments that too often preachers will "ignore or smooth over natural human reactions to situations and people in the Bible or life and rush to assert the truth of some doctrine."
- 13 This follows from Fred Craddock's call for a pastor's sermon to "retrace the inductive trip he [*sic*] took earlier and see if the hearers come to that same conclusion," in Fred Craddock, *As One without Authority: Essays on Inductive Preaching* (Enid, OK: Phillips University Press, 1971), 54.
- 14 This goes beyond simply "narration," as Bryan Chapell helpfully advocates in *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 121–22, to modelling listeners' reactions and struggles with the text.
- 15 For a contemporary example, see Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), 39–44, in which the authors provide a *targum* on Col 1:1–14, then interact with their own projection of how a reader might object to their handling of Scripture in this way.
- 16 Buttrick, *Homiletic*, 47.

- 17 Casey C. Barton, *Preaching through Time: Anachronism as a Way Forward for Preaching* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 13, argues this is an inevitable outcome of the traditional “meant/means” or “bi-focal” hermeneutic. I do not see it as inevitable.
- 18 This is similar to the aim of Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching*, 71–72, which is to transpose the key *ideas* from the world of the text into our own; my suggestion here is that we also do this with the surface details in the text as a way of bringing the text itself to life.
- 19 Abraham Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2013).

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