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ARTICLE



'The Living Word Has Its Way with You': The Apocalyptic Homiletics of Rev. Fleming Rutledge

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the tandem functions of rhetoric and theology through a case study of the apocalyptic homiletics of Rev. Fleming Rutledge, one of the first women ordained to the Episcopal priesthood. We propose that apocalyptic rhetoric might be understood not only with reference to its topics (such as a cataclysmic end of days) or context (social disarray), but as a disclosive and revelatory announcement. Central to this disclosure is the homilist's orientation to agency and the etymology of *apocalypsis* from the Greek *apokaluptein*, to reveal by unveiling (*kalumna*, veil). Through a reading of Rutledge's sermons (1978–2006), contrasting them with mainline Protestant preaching from the 1970s onward, we identify three qualities of apocalyptic homiletics: revelation, catechism, and a totalizing perspective. Offering a distinct theology of rhetoric, the article expands the field of apocalyptic rhetoric by approaching revelation as a theological and rhetorical disclosure-through-intervention, involving the rhetor with divine becoming and perfection.

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Apocalyptic discourses have been a subject of interest among rhetorical scholars for decades. Their ubiquity provokes for rhetorical scholars questions of exigence and purpose: What are the historical contexts in which apocalyptic rhetoric arises, and what attitudes and activities does it encourage? Why does the present seem perennially ominous, where people seem to “hunger for ends and crises” (Kermode 1966, 55)? In a widely cited study, Barry Brummett (1991) argues that apocalyptic rhetoric is “a mode of thought and discourse that empowers its audience to live in a time of disorientation and disorder by revealing to them a fundamental plan within the cosmos” (9). He writes, “Apocalyptic stems from a sense of unexplained and inexplicable change or crisis, from a sense that received systems of explanation have failed, and from a resulting sense of anomie, disorientation, lawlessness, and impending chaos” (23). Similarly focused on situational disarray and confusion, Stephen O’Leary (1994) posits that apocalyptic discourses attempt “to understand the successive human ages and their culmination in a catastrophic struggle between the forces of good and evil” (5). Gunn and Beard (2000) argue in response that the

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contemporary apocalyptic genre “erases teleology and substitutes traditional ‘ends’ with the sublime experience; this experience attempts to postpone resolution and even perpetuates the disorientation and anomie experienced by audiences, ultimately in order to destabilize subjects” (284; see also Kermode 1966, 6). From the perspective of these influential studies, *apocalypsis* is a manipulation of an audience’s experience of order and time. Its principal function is to elicit judgments and influence behaviors in the present using religious symbols of a future event. As such, these scholars approach *apocalypsis* as an audience-centric rhetoric intended to orient or disorient readers, viewers, or listeners.

In this article we examine an alternate approach to apocalyptic rhetoric by considering the homiletics of Rev. Fleming Rutledge (1937-), a widely published author and influential preacher who was one of the first women ordained to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church in the United States. Rutledge’s apocalyptic homiletics integrate rhetoric and theology such that apocalyptic rhetoric can be understood not only with reference to its topics (e.g. the cataclysmic end of days) and context (e.g. social disarray), but also as a disclosive and revelatory announcement. Of central interest in this disclosure is the homilist’s orientation to agency, both human and divine. *Apocalypsis*, rather than addressing an audience with speech *about* God or the end times, enrolls a preacher *in God’s self-revelation* in time, giving the divine agent priority over both the preacher and the audience. Indeed, if we recall the etymology of *apocalypsis* – drawn from the Greek *apokaluptein*, to reveal by unveiling (from *kalumna*, veil) – apocalyptic rhetoric prioritizes the disclosure of a timeless truth in mundane human reality (Bergoffen 1982, 16). Here the truth, as Rutledge (2015) writes, is “apocalypsed” when it breaks through human reality (355). In Rutledge’s sermons, such a revelation issues forth through the preacher’s proclamation. Apocalyptic homiletics, whatever its explicit topic or context, reveals a truth that most of the time is veiled. It therefore is a dynamic, active discourse that, above all, reveals divine agency.

We base our discussion of apocalyptic homiletics here on a reading of eleven of Fleming Rutledge’s sermons, delivered between 1978 and 2015.¹ Among the hundreds of her sermons, these eleven are both exemplary of her preaching and articulate the rhetorical and theological underpinnings of her apocalyptic homiletics. In the analysis, we explicate three qualities of her apocalyptic preaching, contrasting it with the prevalent norms and practices in contemporary mainline churches.² Thus, we situate Rutledge’s apocalyptic homiletics not only in the context of contemporary rhetorical scholarship, but also in that of twenty-first century American Christianity and mainline Protestantism. We demonstrate that her approach to apocalyptic homiletics is *revelatory* rather than prophetic, *catechistic* rather than narrative, and *totalizing* rather than personal. Here we offer a distinct theology of rhetoric. Our analysis of apocalyptic homiletics expands the field of apocalyptic rhetoric

by approaching revelation as a theological *and* rhetorical disclosure-through-intervention, involving the rhetor with divine becoming and perfection.

To examine this theology of rhetoric, we will turn not only to the preaching of Fleming Rutledge but also to the theology of Karl Barth, a twentieth-century Swiss dogmaticist from whose thought Rutledge heavily draws. Grounding Rutledge's apocalyptic homiletics in Barthian apocalyptic theology, we indicate how the former bears witness rhetorically to divine intervention. By definition, a homily is a sermonic speech designed to be conversational (from *homilia*, conversation). As George Kennedy (1980) explains, it is closely connected historically and theoretically to exegesis, the interpretation of and through the biblical text. Homiletics in the prevalent Augustinian vein that Kennedy examines is preaching intended as a "projection of the eloquence of Scripture," and it comes only after the faithful interpretation of Scripture (137).³ By contrast, in the Barthian vein ([1936] 2003) vein, homiletics takes place on the presumption that "human knowledge is an impossibility apart from God's act of self-revelation," and that revelation is "in no way presupposed, assumed, prepared, or conditioned by the receiver of revelation" (296). Consistent with this Barthian theology, Rutledge's homilies constitute hearers not so much as audiences to be addressed as witnesses to the Word of grace. Likewise, the preacher is not so much a persuader as a means of the disclosure of the Word. Thus, her apocalyptic homiletics makes rhetoric and hermeneutics simultaneous rather than sequential. As such, every homiletic utterance is potentially also a means of *apocalypsis*.

Given Rutledge's significance as one of the first female Episcopal priests, our essay contributes not only to scholarship on apocalyptic rhetoric but also to the study of the history of religious oratory, particularly the role of women. And as most histories on the subject note, to study women's religious oratory in the U.S. is to study the history of women's oratory as such, women's access to leadership positions, and women's functions in sociopolitical life (Brekus 1998; Zimmerelli 2015). Christian churches were among the first venues for women to address an audience without fear of character indictments. What makes Rutledge an outlier is that she does not make the same "strategic adaptations" women historically have made to negotiate the punitive sanctions of public speaking (Campbell 1973, 83). Notably, she does not use the so-called prophetic voice, the primary function of which historically was to associate women's public speaking with divine authority. As God's spokespersons, women accessed pulpits and platforms with a kind of unimpeachable accountability well before the establishment of other rights. Our analysis of Rutledge's sermons, thus, joins ongoing efforts to critically assess rhetorical agency that is not containable in, or attributable to, the autonomous individual. As Rutledge (2018) writes, when preaching is really "having its way with you, you will know it, and those who have ears to hear will know it. If you know you are dying, you will know the word of life when you hear it, and it will not be something

plucked out of an online homiletical resource. It will be wrenched out of your gut by something – Someone – whose power issues forth from the same living Word that brought the creation into being out of nothing – *ex nihilo*.” Whether or not one shares Rutledge’s belief in the divine agency to which her sermons bear witness, an analysis of her rhetorical practice promises insights about rhetorical agency itself.

“Apocalyptic” Rhetoric and Apocalyptic Theology

Eschatological oratory has a long history in American public address.⁴ In Christian pulpits and political podiums, it has been a potent force of “religious and secular world-making” (Snyder 2000, 402). From the “great awakenings” of the mid-eighteenth century to the mega-churches of the twenty-first, and from the party politics of the early republic to contemporary climate change debates, sermons and speeches about the end of days are powerfully motivating. Insofar as they are eschatological, they account for what will eventually happen when the present world ends. Playing on the tension between this end being a welcome or terrifying prospect, eschatological speaking allows rhetors to exhort audiences, encourage repentance, and forecast either a total catastrophe or a glorious eternity. These rhetorical tactics sometimes rely on the so-called prophetic genre, or voice. Calling attention to the potentially devastating consequences of sinful or destructive habits, preachers, politicians, and agitators depict the dramas of the eschaton. Doing so imposes an intelligible order even in times of uncertainty. It offers those who are “fearful of their future an explanation of their ‘dark days’ and reassurance of a better tomorrow” (Reid 1983, 238). And with this imposition of order, audiences perceive that their actions in the present determine their future circumstances. In a secular context, this might mean a change in consumer behaviors to moderate one’s carbon footprint; or, if delivered by a candidate for elected office, the implied response to a speech about impending doom might be a vote. In a religious context, it might mean abandoning proscribed vices to avoid judgment and condemnation.

In recent decades, the term “apocalyptic” has been applied by rhetorical scholars to not only eschatological oratory but also to various entertainment media. These scholars investigate, as Frank Kermode (1966) writes, how recurring fictions provide “apocalyptic doctrines of crisis, decadence, and empire, and the division of history into mutually significant phases and transitions” (14). In popular culture, apocalypticism mediates paradoxical desires for destruction and fulfillment. For example, as Casey Ryan Kelly (2016, 2020) argues, pseudo-documentary television dramas of “doomsday preppers” allow audiences to cope with the prospect of a disastrous end to civilization, specifically by recuperating traditional masculine duties to protect and provide. Eric King Watts (2017) makes a similar argument

regarding the “zombie apocalypse” genre, which he attributes to postracial fantasies of reasserted white masculine sovereignty. The genre, he notes, depicts a “post-reality” of inverted hierarchies when, “the state and its weaponized forces of social control – the police and the military – are overrun [and] the roads and countryside are infested with walkers, biters, or bug bombs with a single imperative ... ” (325). Total disarray, Calum Matheson (2019) suggests, supplies an opportunity for “survivalists, ... giving them a chance to prove themselves and master the vagaries of nature just how they imagined early American pioneers to have done” (107). In American popular culture specifically, *apocalypsis* satisfies the sociopolitical needs and formal appetites of certain audiences. Principally, it makes sense of the conflicted idea of human annihilation and the consummation of national(ist) teleology (O’Gorman 2008). The theme of these popular texts is a human experience of the future in relation to the questions of the present.

Apocalyptic theology is *not* doomsday theology in any simple sense. Rather, it is a discourse about divine intervention in human history that makes humans recipient witnesses to God’s revelatory speech. It fell out of favor among theologians and Christians generally as primitivist during much of modernity, but was recovered as an “idiom of the New Testament” in the early twentieth century.⁵ Fundamentally Pauline, apocalyptic theology is focused on revelation, albeit differently so than what is commonly associated with the spectacular book of Revelation. The central premise of apocalyptic theology is that in Jesus Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, God invades the human realm and its chronology. From eternity, God breaks in to wrench Creation from its enslavement to “Sin and Death.”⁶ And, as Beverly Gaventa (2004) explains with reference to Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* in particular, “sin is Sin – not a lower-case transgression, not even a human disposition or flaw in human nature, but an upper-case Power that enslaves humankind and stands over against God” (231; see also Gaventa 2013, 2016). Gaventa writes, “God invades creation in the death of Jesus Christ, releases human beings from the grasp of Sin, and transforms those believers into God’s own children who await their ultimate final redemption as slaves of righteousness” (2004, 239). The event of the invasion, or rather, its continuous eventfulness, is apocalyptic in the sense that it reveals God. In revelation, both the reality of God and, for lack of a better word, the character of God are unveiled. It is thus not by intuition, philosophical principles, or systematic theology that the Christian God may be known. Instead, in the invasion event, humans become witnesses; and in this becoming they are fully human. The witnessing function does not in any way position them as judges, but as recipients of knowledge of God through the issuance of grace.

Apocalyptic theology’s contemporary resurgence may be traced in large part to Karl Barth, a Swiss theologian and preacher of the Calvinist Reformed

tradition who is considered by many to be the most significant theologian of the twentieth century (McGrath 1998, 301). In most of his published works, Barth emphasized biblical homiletics, or an “exposition of holy scripture” toward revelatory ends Barth ([1932–33] 1991, 49). He did so in explicit contrast to what had by the middle of the twentieth century become the gauge of Protestant religious practice, namely, individual experience. Barth wrote, “I have not to talk about scripture but from it. I have not to say something, but merely repeat something. Our task is simply to follow the distinctive movement of thought in the text, to stay with this, and not with a plan that arises out of it” (49). Speaking specifically to the divinely rhetorical intervention of preaching, he asserted, “The Bible is not God’s Word in the sense of a state code that tells us precisely what the view of the state is. In reality we ought to say that the Bible *becomes* God’s Word. Whenever it *becomes* God’s Word, it is God’s Word. What we have here is an event” (78). In the Barthian view, humans are “suspended within the event of Jesus Christ,” and apocalyptic homiletics is proclamation to and for the suspended ones (Ziegler 2018, 23).⁷

Importantly, this encounter happens in the Word. Or, as David Bentley Hart (2003) explains, “The incarnation is the Father’s supreme rhetorical gesture, in which all he says in creation is given its perfect emphasis” (327). Creation and God’s intervention in it are both enunciative. Only God can speak of God; and yet, in the Barthian tradition, preachers must speak of God. Hart writes further, “As God utters himself eternally in his Word, and possesses all the fullness of address and response, and as creation belongs to God’s utterance of himself (as a further articulation, at an analogical remove, of the abundant ‘eloquence’ of divine love), creation may be grasped by theology as language” (2003, 289). In apocalyptic theology, Christ the incarnate Word enters history in a particular place and time *as* Word.⁸ This is what, according to apocalyptic theology, is meant by the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word (*Logos*); and the Word was with God; and the Word was God.” Indeed, the discourse of apocalyptic theology itself depends on the idea and reality of Christ the Son as God’s self-revelation. As William Willimon (2006) writes, “We can speak about God because God has broken the silence between us and turned to us” (71). So, then, Barthian theology has a “homiletical flavor” insofar as “speech and hearing [are] the basis for theological reflection” (Willimon 2006, 19). Apocalyptic sermons appeal to “revelation alone as the basis for its assertions” (49).⁹ This distinguishes apocalyptic preaching from the dominant forms of preaching in mainline Protestant Churches.

The New Homiletics and Mainline Protestant Preaching

The signature preaching trend of the mainline Protestant Church in the twentieth century was the “turn to the listener,” or New Homiletics. With

this trend, preachers made each congregation its own primary interpretative lens, favoring sermonic forms and strategies of delivery that would connect with the individual listener in order to evoke a personal experience of God. Although this turn to the listener was forecasted as early as 1928 by Harry Emerson Fosdick (1928), the famed preacher from New York City's historic Riverside Church, it was effectively inaugurated forty years later in New Testament scholar Fred Craddock's (2001) homiletics text *As One Without Authority* (see also Lowry 2001). As the title suggests, Craddock's preaching model presumes that, as homiletician David Buttrick (1994) writes, "conventional notions of biblical authority are no longer tenable" (91). Indeed, Craddock's title implicitly inverts the ordination commission given to pastors in many mainline traditions, a rite occasioned by a bishop laying hands upon the preacher's head and admonishing him or her to "Take thou authority to preach the Word of God." Effectively sidelining the communicative power of distinctively biblical language, Craddock affirms the New Homiletics premise of a common human experience. In a scriptural idiom, the New Homiletics definitively announces that the word can no longer work what it says, or effect what it bespeaks. It becomes a report rather than an act, abandoning the homiletic tradition of *Deus loquitur*, God speaking.

As One Without Authority begins with Craddock (2001) bemoaning that "the church has no retirement program for old words that fought well at Nicaea, Chalcedon, and Augsburg; they are kept in the line of march even if the whole mission is slowed to a snail's pace and observers on the side are bent double in laughter" (8). Marshaling Søren Kierkegaard, Craddock describes "a general experience of the loss of the power of words. No doubt the fact that many today are bombarded with words has contributed to the decay of meaning. By limitless new forms, made possible by electronic media, we are surrounded by words." (7). This paradox of meaning is grounded, as New Homiletics theorist Charles Rice (1970) similarly argues, in the disconnect between contemporary and biblical contexts. To Rice, the preacher's task is to bridge the two hermeneutically. Rice insists, however, that the distinctive language of the Christian faith is incapable of carrying the gospel to present day audiences. The word itself is the problem for Christian preaching. What the preacher must not do, says Rice, "is withdraw into the world of the Bible" (51).¹⁰ New Homiletics recommends that the sermon unfold as a first-person narrative from a shared point of contact between speaker and hearer. The preacher must give priority not to the biblical text, whose status as revelation no longer is granted, but to vivid imagery of universal human experience.

With New Homiletics, a sermon follows an inductive structure that allows listeners to accompany a preacher along a journey of discovery, the destination of which coincides with the insight first experienced by the preacher in exegeting the biblical passage. This structure replicates within the hearers the sermon preparation process, taking them from an initial disequilibrium, provoked by

human experience, to a final resolution clarified by means of the biblical text. Craddock (2001) writes, “because the particulars of life provide the place of beginning, there is the necessity of a ground of shared experience . . . these common experiences, provided they are meaningful in nature and are reflected upon with insight and judgment, are for the inductive method essential to the preaching experience” (58). The inductive preacher, explains Charles Campbell (1997), “moves from human experience, which can be understood apart from the gospel, to the gospel, which is correlated with or sheds light on that experience” (127). With the inductive method, the preacher’s task is not to announce what God has done in Jesus Christ in the confidence that the self-revealing God still unveils God’s self in the act of proclamation, but to evoke an emotional response in the listener. Given that the New Homiletics judges biblical idioms to suffer from stale familiarity, Craddock builds on Kierkegaard’s concept of communication by indirection as the most effective means of evocation. “What is necessary, what is needed,” Craddock (1978) suggests, “is something else; an experience of the information we already possess” (104). Craddock argues that sermons should move like a good story because “stories provide the best vehicle for indirect speech and overhearing the gospel” in new and surprising ways (84).

In so far as New Homiletics has lost its “eschatological nerve,” as Tom Long (2009) suggests, it reverses the trajectory of apocalyptic proclamation, which presumes the ability of the living God to come on the scene through God’s self-appointed means (73). New Homiletics relies on the preacher for its impact rather than on a God who operates in and with the biblical text *extra nos*, outside of human experience. In the legacy of Craddock, preaching – not the preached God – “makes something happen” (Craddock 2001, 132). The form and performance of the sermon effect what Barthian apocalyptic homiletics reserves for God only.

“But Now . . . ”: Fleming Rutledge’s Apocalyptic Homiletics

After completing a Master of Divinity degree at Union Theological Seminary, Fleming Rutledge was ordained to the priesthood of the Episcopal Church in 1977. She spent twenty-two years in parish ministry in New York and Connecticut, and was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Divinity in 1999 from Virginia Theological Seminary. She has been a visiting scholar at the American Academy in Rome and a Fellow at the Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton University. The author of several books, a public theologian in the Anglican communion, and frequent contributor to both *Christianity Today* and Twitter, Rutledge teaches and preaches internationally. Distinguishing between her apocalyptic preaching and the preaching of her fellow priests and pastors in the mainline Protestant church, Rutledge emphasizes the agency of evil alongside humans and God, the divine agent. She says, “People don’t want

to hear about sin, suffering, evil, or judgment. [...] We want to be happy. We want to be positive. We want to overlook the almost unbelievable problems we face today” (Galli 2016, 36, 39). Against the pressure of positivity, Rutledge’s apocalyptic preaching permits no circumlocution of the death and darkness of the human realm.¹¹

As a case study in apocalyptic preaching, Rutledge is in many ways perplexing. The severity of her King James phrasing and macabre imagery contrast palpably with her grandmotherly appearance and thick Virginian accent. Having delivered hundreds of sermons over the past four decades, Rutledge (2018) laments how “New Age philosophies” of “human potential – which often takes the guise of ‘spirituality’” have become “so integrated into the psychological makeup of our contemporary culture . . . that we hardly notice them anymore.” She contrasts this homiletic culture of “wishful thinking” and “illusions” with biblical preaching, a term she uses interchangeably with apocalyptic homiletics:

Many people, clergy and lay people alike, think we are hearing biblical preaching because the sermons we hear on Sunday seem to be based on a biblical text, but that is not what makes a sermon biblical. If the preacher is not personally invested in expounding the text, so that he or she seems to be risking something, it’s not biblical preaching. If the sermon does not seem to be coming out of the preacher’s inmost convictions, it’s not biblical preaching. If the preacher is not preaching as George Whitfield did, “a dying man to dying men,” it’s not biblical preaching. (Rutledge 2018)

In this section of the essay, we analyze the rhetorical qualities of Rutledge’s apocalyptic homiletics. Our contention is that the most effective way to study apocalyptic homiletics is to demonstrate in detail how it works in tandem rhetorically and theologically. In order to do this, we are best served by a comparative approach, distinguishing apocalyptic homiletics from the norms of post-1970s mainline preaching, the Craddock-esque genre we surveyed above. Based on analysis of representative sermons, we characterize Rutledge’s apocalyptic homiletics as revelatory, catechistic, and totalizing.

Revelatory Rather than Prophetic

That Rutledge’s preaching is revelatory means that its principal function is to make known something that is otherwise veiled, in keeping with *apocalypsis*. In the homily, God, according to Rutledge’s Barthian theology, breaks into the world. In this, agency lies not with the homilist but with the divine, which punctures the membrane of present place and time. And the needle that facilitates the puncturing is biblical. Thus, Rutledge’s sermons are not written as descriptions of God or reports on what God has done or will do, but revelations of what is. They are not primarily moral lessons to be implemented in daily life; rather, the sermons are God’s self-disclosure. For example, in

“Advent Begins in the Dark,” Rutledge preaches what is perhaps the central idea of apocalyptic theology, God’s invasion of a world in trouble through Christ’s incarnation and resurrection. As she puts it, the invasion “must come from somewhere else – in a burst of transcendent power breaking in upon on from beyond our sphere altogether.” Recognizing that this burst is beyond human action and cannot be fully grasped by the human mind, apocalyptic preaching has as its main duty to proclaim the burst and in so doing continuously yet momentarily animate it.¹² Through revelatory proclamation, what is, becomes.¹³

Compared to the affirmational sermons of most mainline churches, which reassure congregations through praise of the human spirit, apocalyptic preaching is unyieldingly focused on human helplessness and Sin. These topics are indissociable from the human condition according to apocalyptic theology, and must not be circumscribed. In “The Third Sign,” a Good Friday sermon, Rutledge references the traditional Lenten Collect of the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* in whose liturgy “We have no power of ourselves to help ourselves.” As God knows our helplessness, Rutledge says, “God in Jesus Christ places himself squarely in the path of this world’s careening course toward self-destruction and reverses it.”¹⁴ In the Advent sermon “The Magic Reversal,” she repeatedly breaks with the general expectation that December is reserved for holiday cheer. She snubs the idea of the holy family as a general “symbol of peace,” highlighting instead the “illustrations of horror” that abound in current events, and calling advent “the season of the Wrath of God.”¹⁵ Noting that “We do not want to see anything unpleasant at Christmas,” Rutledge disrupts the audience’s festive attunement. She persists, “[T]here is no magic. We can send Christmas cards about love and peace all we want, but the human race is utterly incapable of turning itself around.” With this message, Rutledge comports her homily with a disruptive message consistent with a disruptive revelation. The homily presses the audience’s presumptions as God presses in on the world. Rutledge adjusts errant attitudes toward the Christmas holiday and reveals its difficult but true significance in the incarnation. In this way, she removes the jolly tinsel veil so that the theological significance of the birth of Christ may be known.

Examining how Rutledge unyieldingly adjusts her audience’s errant beliefs, it is here necessary to orient our project with reference to the difference between apocalyptic homiletics and prophetic rhetoric. Prophetic rhetoric has had a considerable impact on American public address since at least the eighteenth century. And a noteworthy body of rhetorical scholarship on both Christian and secular texts focuses on the prophetic genre and ethos, specifically various iterations of the jeremiad (Bercovitch 1978; Carpenter 1981; Owen 2002; Zulick 1992). Moreover, prophecy in response to a divine calling has functioned historically as a framework for women’s public speaking (Lawless 1998, 7).¹⁶ As Michael W. Casey (2000) writes, “female preachers

created their authority to speak by taking the role of a prophet who received authority to speak from God, not man” (2). With prophetic rhetoric, Steven Tramel Gaines (2018) similarly argues, “a woman speaking in a masculinized space and place in a patriarchal tradition” could historically “encourag[e] change by communicating from sacred foundations” (59). The prophetic voice has historically facilitated some transcendence of gender in the pulpit.

In some ways, apocalyptic preaching and prophetic speech are similar. Both bespeak the fulfillment or consummation of Creation and the Cosmos. In accounting for this unfolding perfection, both identify the events through which the present age will end and another will begin. This ending, for both apocalyptic homiletics and prophetic rhetoric, is a good thing since the present age is bound by evil and human failure.¹⁷ Further, both prophetic rhetoric and apocalyptic homiletics are explicitly resistant to rhetorical adaptation, or “lacking in concern for audience or occasion” (Timmerman 2005, 106).¹⁸ That is, both claim an unadulterated message that must not be adapted to please an audience. Because, as James Darsey (1997) explains, “given a truth that is absolute, it makes no sense to talk of ‘practical wisdom,’ ‘sensitivity to the occasion,’ ‘opportunistic economizing,’ ‘the capacity to learn from experience,’ ‘flexibility and looseness of interest,’ or ‘bargaining’” (21). Willimon (2006) writes similarly about Barth’s “eschew[ing] of rhetorical concerns in order to leave our proclamation in a highly vulnerable position” (49). Both apocalyptic homiletics and prophetic rhetoric place rhetorical agency with the divine rather than with the rhetor. And because both preacher and prophet speak “in God’s service,” a deliberately persuasive effort is inappropriate and unnecessary to each (Reid 1983, 241).

In significant ways, however, apocalyptic homiletics and prophetic rhetoric function differently. First, apocalyptic homiletics is not hortatory. It is not primarily intended to change its audience’s behaviors in everyday life. Prophets (in both religious and secular genres) are compelled by a higher power or transcendent cause to persuade a community to recognize a problem with the status quo, repent, and intentionally do better. This directedness toward social or political change accounts for the prophetic genre’s prevalence in various forms of activism (Lynch 1995; Terrill 2001). By contrast, apocalyptic preachers operate on the theological assumption that, however well-intending, humans cannot effect change on their own volition, especially with respect to salvation. As Rutledge highlights in the sermon “The Crucifixion of Self-Help,” humans are acted upon by the Divine. Those “who once were far off have been brought near [to God].” Incapable of moving toward God, Rutledge explains in “What is Your Battle Station?,” humans can only await him who “comes in the bread and the wine of the Eucharist to draw us all into himself.”¹⁹ No sermon can move its audience to choose not to sin. Indeed, no human could make such a choice. It would be misleading, of course, to say that apocalyptic sermons never speak about human error, or rather, “the gravity of

Sin” (Galli 2016, 36). But unlike the common advisory sermons of mainline churches, their purpose is rarely to prescribe or proscribe conduct.²⁰ Rutledge’s preaching refers to social issues and crises to illustrate the reality of Sin and the agency of God at work.

Second, prophetic rhetoric depends on a separation between the prophet rhetor and the audience. As Darsey (1997) writes, “the prophet does not speak as a member of the group he [*sic*] is addressing; he does not speak in the inclusive ‘we’” (26). And, “because of their marginalized status, prophets can speak as messengers of God’s anger and impending judgment” (Pauley 1998, 516).²¹ In apocalyptic preaching, however, the inclusivity of human corruption is total. Barth’s 1955 prison sermon “Saved by Grace” clarifies that,

We are all sufferers . . . I stand ready to confess being the greatest sinner among you all; . . . Sinners are people who in the judgment of God, and perhaps of their own conscience, missed and lost their way, who are not just a little, but totally guilty, hopelessly indebted and lost not only in time, but in eternity. We are such sinners. And we are prisoners. (Barth 1961, 37)

Barth counts himself among the prisoners, proclaiming nevertheless that “Our prison door is open. Our suffering has come to an end” (39). The apocalyptic homily therefore locates the homilist in the midst of the community to which it is addressed.

Third and relatedly, prophecy as a rhetorical act is usually marked by an individual experience of being ineluctably called by God to speak. The frame of the prophet’s rhetorical act may be summarized as, “I am empowered to speak because God told me to.” This is oftentimes associated with the prophet’s extreme reluctance (Zulick 1992, 137). By comparison, an apocalyptic homilist functions rhetorically not as a spokesperson for God but as a participant in God’s own unfolding, or revelation (Hauerwas 2018, 165). It is an oratorical version of John the Baptist’s prominent finger on the Isenheim Altarpiece, pointing to the cross in the center of Grünewald’s painting (Figure 1). Standing beside the crucified Christ, John is theologically significant not in himself but only insofar as he points toward the eternal truth. As Rutledge (2002) writes with reference to John’s magnified finger and position in the painting, “Many Christian preachers over the centuries have seen their vocation in these terms, always to point away from themselves to the Crucified One” (63; see also Willimon 2006, 6). In this sense, apocalyptic homiletics bears witness more than it prophesies.

One of the most complicated yet important distinctions between prophetic rhetoric and apocalyptic homiletics is the former’s emphasis on the future (Kennedy 1980, 124). For although prophecy is addressed to the present and its ills, its focus is on ultimate ends. Comparatively, apocalyptic homiletics reflects the theological principle that divine intervention occurs in an always

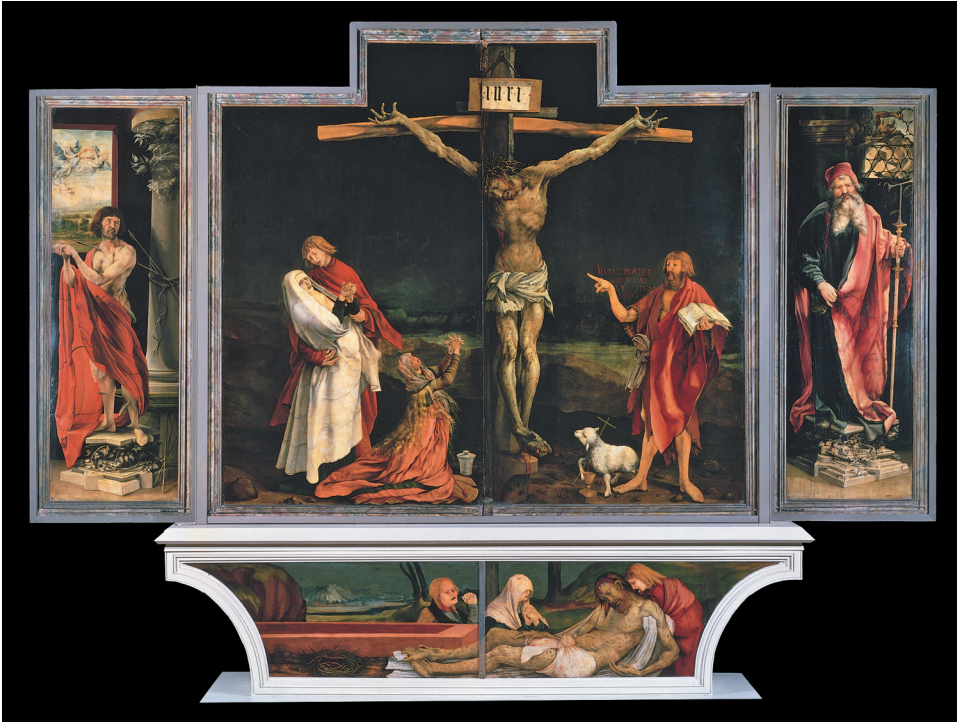


Figure 1. *Isenheim Altarpiece* by Matthias Grünewald. Oil on panel, 105 × 120 inches. Unterlinden Museum, Colmar, France. Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.

synchronous present. For example, in “The Subject of the Verb,” Rutledge conveys the complexity of apocalyptic time with what she calls “the already but not yet.” Throughout the sermon, she relies on the phrase “But now . . . ,” which serves as an important contrast marker in the Pauline epistles. “But now” captures the impact of a transition that is total in its impact yet is not complete. Specifically, “now” in Rutledge’s words is the event in which “the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law . . . the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”²² With “But now . . . ,” Rutledge identifies a paradigmatic shift from the past that continues to effect itself. By leaning heavily on the present idea of “now,” she removes the time that separates the Roman epistle from the moment of her own revelatory preaching. The “now” of Paul, in other words, is inseparable from the “now” of Rutledge’s sermon. She makes the subject of the sermon, (i.e., justification through Christ’s resurrection, *dikaio syne*) and thereby the revelation of the divine, a time-less event. Or, as she says, “‘but now’ is the fulcrum on which the ages turn, the hinge of salvation.”

Rutledge’s revelatory preaching thus reorients the audience’s understanding of time, specifically the time of *apocalypsis*. In “Advent Begins in the Dark,” referring to the doctrinal Second Coming of Christ as “the final breaking in of

God upon our darkness,” she proclaims an imminent, almost-present occurrence that troubles the idea of a future coming. The audience recognizes that the Second Coming has yet to happen, of course; but Rutledge reframes W. H. Auden’s notion of “the time being” to “the time between,” explaining, “In a very deep sense, the entire Christian life in this world is lived in Advent, between the first and second comings of the Lord.”²³ Similarly, in “Something Evil This Way Comes,” revelation is at once what has already happened (Christ’s victory on the cross), and what will eventually come to pass. The “promise” of God’s *apocalypsis*, then, “tells us that evil is vanquished *now*, in suffering love, and *will be* vanquished forever in the triumph of God.” Rutledge’s preaching makes the promise known, pointing to it rather than forecasting it as a prophecy. Importantly, she does not assign the audience a task in anticipation of the imminent triumph. Without exhortation, Rutledge uncouples the idea of a Second Coming from any human activity, good or bad. Apocalyptic time, and thus the time that determines apocalyptic homiletics, spans the already and the not yet, where “already” does not mean the past as such, and “not yet” does not mean that a certain amount of time has yet to pass.

Adding further to a conflation of timeframes, the revelatory function and purpose of Rutledge’s preaching are evident in how she incorporates divine utterances topically. For example, in the “Magic Reversal,” Rutledge intertwines her own proclamation with the so-called “annunciation myth”: the New Testament account of how Mary was told by the angel Gabriel that she would bear the Son of God. Weaving the angel’s annunciation speech with her own, Rutledge too delivers the Gospel, the good news of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ. As Mary in the story becomes aware of God’s intervention – as God reveals God’s self to Mary – Rutledge’s audience, too, receives the message, and it becomes known to them. From the perspective of *apocalypsis*, as Mary’s reality was wholly disrupted by God, so is the human condition at any given time broken open whenever the Gospel of intervention is proclaimed.

What connects the annunciation story with apocalyptic homiletics is the centrality of God’s disclosure. As Rutledge concludes the sermon, “In the announcement of Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, we hear a voice from beyond ourselves, a voice quite literally from out of this world.” Similarly, in the “But now . . .” sermon, Rutledge intertwines her own voice with others by recounting Martin Luther’s theological struggles with Pauline exegesis. She explains how Luther, while reading Romans, received the idea of becoming justified to righteousness, and how the “passage of Paul became to [him] a gate to heaven.” In the passage, Paul proclaims that, in Rutledge’s words, God “comes to meet us when we are at our very worst.” And Luther, again in Rutledge’s account, receives Paul’s words. The sermon ultimately becomes a multivocal but uniform and synchronous revelation from Paul to Luther to

Rutledge and her audience. The good news, the Gospel, is not traceable to any one of them, but rather each one participates in God's disclosure, intervention, and salvation.

Catechistic Rather than Narrative

Mainline Protestant sermons in the idiom Craddock taught tend to adhere to an inductive pattern: they begin with an invitational introduction, often with reference to a current event or local issue; this is followed by an allegorically meaningful story that may or may not involve the preacher personally; and, as the sermon concludes, the congregation is supplied with a life lesson to take home. At the center of this pattern is a narrative that facilitates identification between the preacher and the audience. In keeping with Craddock's emphasis on storytelling, the narrative casts both parties as good protagonists in a world that threatens their best intentions and efforts (Maddux 2011, 308–12). And, in the end, the sermon affirms the audience's resolve to remain on the side of good.

Significantly, the inductive form of the narrative moves the audience through a sequence where the initial premise is relatively open and the subsequent ones in the body of the sermon may become more difficult to understand or accept. The intelligibility of the complex parts of the story depends on the inductive movement. At the end of a narrative, then, what might be called the "big finish" is not only the culmination of a story but also the storyteller's accomplishment. The strength or weakness of the ending reflects his or her storytelling savvy. So, too, it is with narrative preaching. The inductive form leads to a conclusion wherein the preacher is poised to impress. It generates an experience of learning from the preacher what the preacher has designated as the sermon's message.²⁴

By contrast, apocalyptic preaching follows a deductive structure. It does not, so to speak, save the best for last. It begins not with an invitation but with what appears to be an agreement on terms of engagement between preacher and congregation. For example, at the outset of "Something Evil This Way Comes," Rutledge states explicitly that she is going to "give away my main points here, at the beginning." There is little introduction to warm up the audience. As she proceeds, Rutledge announces that her main points will be about "the problem of evil," an abrupt introduction for an audience that might be accustomed to more euphemistic language. The rest of the sermon is a dialectical exercise examining in detail various facets of the subject. Another illustration of the marked difference between inductive narrative sermons and deductive apocalyptic sermons appears in the middle of Rutledge's "What Is Your Battle Station?" where she interjects a vivid analogy to explain the idea of the armor of God being placed upon Christian believers.²⁵ "Think of the firefighter who passes on his helmet to his son,"

she urges. The tenor of the analogy is such that its placement and function capture the difference between Rutledge's apocalyptic homiletics and mainline preaching models. In the latter, the implied heroism of a firefighter, the image of a helmet, and the patrilinear affection are so rhetorically potent that they seemingly ought to have been used for the sermon's introduction, not a mid-way interjection. The introduction of an apocalyptic sermon, however, is but an explication of what is to be apocalypsed, or revealed. The notion of saving the best for last makes no sense since the entire utterance of the homily is a divine proclamation, or "the best" that an audience can expect to hear.

As proclamation, apocalyptic homiletics is catechistic (from *katēkhein*, to instruct orally). It assumes that a significant portion of a sermon should be dedicated to expanding and enriching the audience's biblical knowledge. Minimally reliant on stories from everyday life, an apocalyptic preacher directs the audience's attention to Scripture as a point of origin for God's revelation. In other words, it is biblically rather than narratively instructional, distinguishable in this sense from mainline sermons that conclude a story with a lesson. And although it might seem entirely unsurprising that a preacher quotes the Bible, it is imperative for our purposes to note how biblical passages become part of the apocalyptic homily, and to what end. When Rutledge invokes Old Testament prophets, for example, she foregoes the prophets' individual fates. Instead of narrating the lives of the prophets, she pairs their writings dialectically with New Testament passages in order to illuminate each one respectively.²⁶ Similarly, Rutledge refers in her sermons (both "But Now . . ." and "The Crucifixion of Self-Help") to the Pauline letters as "indispensable commentary" on the four New Testament gospels, demonstrating how to read, for example, the *Letter to the Ephesians* as "a Class A summary of the gospel message." As Rutledge explains in "The Subject of the Verb," congregations must "wrestle continually with doubt and ambiguity" in order to learn. "If there is one thing we in the mainlines can do to break this impasse [of inter-denominational demonization], it is a renewal of the knowledge of God." With catechism, Rutledge juxtaposes biblical texts that are familiar to her audience with less familiar passages. In "Apocalyptic War," for instance, she matches the well-known Isaiah quote about swords and plowshares with an excerpt from Joel, one of the minor prophets.²⁷ To frame these pairings, Rutledge brings in commentary from noted theologians and offers her audience an accessible introduction to theology on biblical terms.

Rutledge's catechistic emphasis leads to an insistence on specificity with respect to both Scripture and doctrine. That is, apocalyptic catechism-as-revelation (or revelation-as-catechism) insists on the particularity of God's intervention in the world, and the details of the accounts of the intervention.²⁸ These are essential for the connection between apocalyptic theology and apocalyptic preaching. In "The Cross at Ground Zero," the sermon Rutledge gave shortly after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, she contrasts

specifically Christian proclamation of the Gospel with “generic religiosity.” In her words, “Christianity stands out because it is based on actual events that happened in a specific, documented place at a specific, identifiable time. That’s why we say ‘crucified under Pontius Pilate’ in the Creed. The appearance of God’s Messiah in human history is hard news; it is the real thing.” Making audiences aware of this particularity and its consequences for Christian traditions is required of apocalyptic preaching. As Rutledge says, “A huge majority of Americans believe in God, but that can mean almost anything. The question that really matters is, ‘What do you think of Christ crucified?’” The distinction she draws not only separates “generic religiosity” and Christian theology, but also mandates a particular kind of proclamation: namely the kind that proclaims a particular Gospel. If, as she says, the crucifixion is the “inner criterion of Christian theology,” and the charge of preachers is to announce it, then the announcement must be distinguishable in its particularity from others, especially, for Rutledge, “Self-help [as] the American gospel, which translates into self-congratulations and self-protection.” Apocalyptic preaching depends on the scriptural and historical connections between a singular intervention and the incarnate Word. In Rutledge’s preaching, Christ the Incarnate intervenes to reveal a truth that is both eternal and particular. Without catechistic precision, apocalyptic homiletics would lose its most important theological principles.

Totalizing Rather than Personal

In apocalyptic theology, as in apocalyptic preaching, proclamation is totalizing, an utterance of absolute truth as Word. Rutledge spends little time on the personal lives of her audience, and even less time on stories from her own. Unlike many mainline preachers, she does not lead her audience to identify with key characters in biblical scenarios, or translate the scenarios into the audience’s everyday context. She does not invite the audience to imagine what the characters might do if they appeared in the present moment. And she rarely illustrates either Scripture or her own claims with personal experience, either of a religious or mundane kind. The issue of human experience is effectively bracketed in apocalyptic theology and preaching as “notoriously undependable” (Willimon 2006, 78).

Indeed, there are few if any instances in Rutledge’s sermons of the types of invitational hypotheticals that mainline preachers regularly use: “How would you respond if you were Rachel?” “Are you one of the foolish bridesmaids who fell asleep and ran out of oil for your lamp?” or perhaps, “Have there been times when you have felt like a confused disciple?” As an apocalyptic preacher, Rutledge proceeds on the assumption that her task is to proclaim a transcendent reality and that the proclamation itself participates in God’s adjustment of a warped world. This task is entirely separable

from the audience's experience of divine adjustment. Thus, while she occasionally imports illustrations from ordinary life, she does so specifically to point to the announcement of the Gospel. The personal experiences of the audience are at stake only in so far as audience members might be comforted by the knowledge that the score of their transgressions has been settled. Importantly, however, comfort is a potential benefit, rather than an objective, of apocalyptic preaching.

Because their purpose is to unveil truth, Rutledge's sermons do not culminate in practical instructions. Rhetorically and theologically, they cannot submit to divine *apocalypsis* and at the same time advise the audience members on how they might personally use what they hear in their communities, relationships, or workplaces. As noted earlier, apocalyptic homiletics is not hortatory. It is not designed to rectify problems in the present because it assumes both that the fundamental problem of human errancy cannot be solved by humans, and that, indeed, it has already been fully absolved through Christ's sacrifice. And, in so far as apocalyptic homiletics is not hortatory, it is not personal. For example, the sermon titled "Apocalyptic War" does not ask the audience to face conflicts in their own lives with courage and conviction; it does not, as an audience in a mainline church might expect, reference Joel of the Old Testament to suggest that the audience, like Joel, finds itself in "the valley of decision." In her other sermons, wherein Rutledge briefly mentions the bravery of certain contemporary individuals (for example, "What is Your Battle Station?," which recounts the faithful service of Mexican priest Samuel Ruiz Garcia), the focus is never on the individual. The occasional hero figure in Rutledge's sermons is not presented to be emulated, as he or she merely points toward Christ in the world. It is not important that the audience of the apocalyptic homily think of certain Christian individuals as role models. Whether or not the audience is convinced to live ethically has no impact on the truth of the Gospel. The personal lives of a congregation are incidental to proclamation.²⁹

Illustrative of the difference between the totalizing perspective of apocalyptic preaching and the personal emphasis in mainline preaching is the former's tendency to de-individuate key topics such as Sin. Throughout her sermons, Rutledge rejects the common Christian idea (to her, misconception) that good people choose good behavior and bad people choose to sin. "Sin," she asserts in "But Now . . .," "is not the sum total of a bunch of individual transgressions, [but] the fundamental condition of man [*sic*]." As she directs attention to this fundamental condition, Rutledge's preaching makes known an eternal truth: It is not the case that some people sin and other do not, but rather that all humans are held hostage by the powers of Sin and Death and that God has and will destroy those powers. She says, "Against the relentlessly upbeat forms of popular Christianity in America, we affirm the pain of living in the sphere of Sin and Death, and we acknowledge that we live only and always in hope."³⁰ In

this theological framework, evil is not a euphemism or metaphor for human selfishness or frailty, as is common usage in mainline sermons. It is biblical and cosmically transcendent, irreducible to the human. As she puts it in “Something Evil This Way Comes,”

Evil is everywhere present in the world of the Bible. In the New Testament, the devil is a leading character. . . . The Bible personifies evil in the figure of Satan. . . . The devil, of course, is not a man in a red suit with a pitchfork. We all understand that. What is he, then? We need to know.

Apocalyptic preaching thus unveils the reality of evil that compels humans toward Sin. A preacher’s avoidance of this reality undermines his or her prospects of proclaiming the truth. The force makes humans the collateral damage of a cosmic battle. Again, then, the presumption of a personal choice to sin or not is incompatible with the theology and homiletics of apocalypticism.

Conclusions and Implications

One goal of this article is to complement the extant literature on apocalyptic rhetoric with a case study in apocalyptic homiletics. The revelatory act of *apocalypsis* is at once rhetorical and theological, and at the nexus of this “at once” is the issue of human and divine agency. From the vantage point of apocalyptic theology, an apocalyptic homily *makes*, in the sense of *creates*, the two parties of a rhetorical event (the preacher and the audience) and makes them radically subservient to the theological disclosure of the divine. God discloses God, and the preacher and the audience become witnesses, thereby fully human in the reflection of the intervention. Divine revelation renders the apocalyptic homilist a participant rather than a mouthpiece, advocate, teacher, storyteller, or community organizer – all of which are recognizable figures in the pulpits of mainline churches. As we have explicated through our comparative analysis, the grounding of apocalyptic homiletics in apocalyptic theology is discernible in the differences among apocalyptic preaching and both the traditional Augustinian homily and mainline preaching. It is significant for our purposes that the apocalyptic homilist operates on the assumption that what makes her preaching apocalyptic is the same thing that makes her *not* the agent of the rhetorical event to which she bears witness. Apocalyptic homiletics, to wit, deepens the concept of apocalyptic rhetoric as it has been disciplinarily understood insofar as the apocalyptic homilist is not a prophet, the audience’s activities are not determinate of the end of the world, and the “end” has in a significant sense already happened. As Rutledge declares, the apocalyptic sermon participates in the absolute “now” that is as yet also a “not yet.”

Our article also suggests the value of analyzing religious rhetorical performances, such as sermons, in light of post-humanist hermeneutic theories. Key to this is critical attention to conceptions of both agency and reality, specifically the “epistemological assumptions concerning contingency, finitude, and ultimacy in the social construction of what counts as reality for listeners” (Reid 1998, 166).³¹ Rutledge as a rhetor acts on the assumption that the Holy Spirit “bloweth where it listeth,” or, as she suggests, has its way with her.³² Sometimes it animates a sermon and sometimes it does not. And regardless of the preacher’s intent and efforts, the difference is not in her purview. Rutledge performs as a preacher in a space that is theologically committed to subordinating human agency. Moreover, her apocalyptic homilies subordinate not only her agency and personal experience but also that of her audience. Her audience is not called by her sermons to reflect on how faith feels on a personal level, or to change their wicked ways. Given this depersonalization, and the post-humanist project of decentralizing the autonomous individual, our work points to the prospect of knowledge through interpretation in suspension of the human subject. It calls for a critical attitude toward human experiences of reality, specifically as such experiences affirm human sovereignty. What is real in apocalyptic theology – that Christ has died, is risen and will come again – can never be verified experientially but must continuously invade the human realm through proclamation.

From the perspective of apocalyptic theology and homiletics, Rutledge’s posture in the pulpit is congruent with her commitment to the idea of imminent divine intercession. It makes her continuous return to the brutality and particularity of the Christian crucifixion a rehearsal of the event in which the divine intervenes. For the “cross itself is the definitive *apocalypsis* of God” (Rutledge 2015, 353). Thus, the apocalyptic homily’s revelation has an authoritative force. It is designed not to engage audiences through human experience, but to fundamentally disorient this experience. Rather than inviting audiences to identify with her in the encounter that the sermon generates, she beseeches God to enter the encounter and sanctify it. In this rhetorical event, she as preacher does not invent so much as testify to truth; and the audience does not so much evaluate her speech as bear witness to the disclosure within it. The deductive form and catechistic emphasis announce, indeed proclaim, to an audience via scriptural specificity that *this is how it is*. “How it is” and “What is” (that is, the truth of God and/as Incarnate Word) are made known through the homily. Significantly for the study of apocalyptic rhetoric, the disorientation of human experience may or may not be recognizable as eschatology. Thus, apocalyptic preaching is not exclusively or even primarily about epic events at the end of the world, but rather a form of, and an orientation toward, disclosure – the revelatory announcement that the “age to come” has already begun.

Notes

1. The oldest sermon, “But Now . . .,” was delivered in 1978 in New York City. “The Magical Reversal,” was delivered in 1984 in New York City. “God’s Apocalyptic War” in 1985 in Connecticut; “A People Prepared” in 1997 in Connecticut; “A Cross at Ground Zero” in 2001 in New York City; “What Is Your Battle Station?” in 2001 in Virginia; “Wrath Redeemed” in 2006 in Missouri; “Something Evil This Way Comes” in 2015 at Trinity Cathedral in Columbia, South Carolina; “The Third Sign: The Open Tombs” at Grace Episcopal Church in New York City; “The Subject of the Verb” at a conference of Presbyterian clergy at Princeton Theological Seminary, no date available; “The Crucifixion of Self-Help” is published in Rutledge’s *The Undoing of Death* (2002, 215–24), but its original date and location of delivery are undetermined. Rutledge has commented that date and place have been removed from some of her sermons to emphasize that they are preachable apart from particular contexts.
2. Mainline churches (not to be confused with mainstream religion or spirituality) are a group of seven Protest denominations that includes (in order of membership size): the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Episcopal Church, the American Baptist Churches USA, the United Church of Christ, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).
3. As Kennedy (1980, 149–60) explains, Augustine’s writings represent a turning point in the history of Christian rhetoric, articulating the idea that classical eloquence might serve rather than corrupt the Christian Gospel. With Augustine’s *Confessions* and *De Doctrina Christiana*, eloquence becomes an instrument against pagan threats and heresy.
4. While we distinguish between eschatology, a dramatic account of things in the end times, and *apocalypsis*, the distinction is complicated because, according to apocalyptic theology, the revelation of God in the past, present, and future is connected to the end of the world as we know it and, more importantly, the beginning of a “new thing.” On the creation of a “new thing,” see Isaiah 43:19. Most cultures and religions subscribe to an eschatology of some sort; but Christian *apocalypsis* as theorized by Barth and preached by Rutledge is more particular in its emphasis on continuous divine intervention.
5. Philip Ziegler (2018) offers an instructive introduction to the historical reemergence of apocalyptic theology. His commentary is especially helpful on the distinction made earlier between apocalypticism and eschatology. Writes Ziegler, “The start of the twenty-first century has brought with it the suggestion that the relation between the original eschatological density of the New Testament witness and the contemporary credibility of Christian dogmatics can and must be fundamentally reset. In view is a new kind of ‘apocalyptic theology’ that overturns the modern view of apocalyptic as merely antiquarian curiosity while, at the same time, repudiating the weaponized eschatologies of soothsaying doomsday calendarists, often associated with popular varieties of ‘apocalypticism’” (18).
6. In several places in this essay, we follow Rutledge’s practice of personifying Sin and Death, marked by capitalizing. This reflects Paul’s treatment of those subjects in significant epistle passages. See, for example, Romans 8:2.
7. With this phrase, Ziegler (2018) is drawing on the Barthian theology of Walter Lowe (2010).
8. This idea recurs throughout the Heidelberg Catechism. For a contemporary English translation, see RCUS (2011). Barthian apocalyptic draws authority from the Second Helvetic Confession, a foundational sixteenth century document for the Swiss Reformed Church, which asserts that preaching the word of God is the word of God.

9. With Barth, Willimon (2006) comments on the introduction to John, cogently aligning the idea of Christ the “communicative event” with the Aristotelian *logos* (as speech, argument, and logic) that continues to sustain rhetorical scholarship. He writes, “Aristotle certainly concerned himself with the reasonableness of things, by which he meant the purpose of things. In the beginning was the reason” (80). Thus seen, the Word (i.e., the Creator and the incarnate Son and the utterance of both as one) inaugurates a purposeful creation.
10. This remark may be read as an implicit critique of Karl Barth’s earliest essay for preachers titled “The Strange New World of the Bible.”
11. Commenting on the significance of Rutledge’s ordination and her theological severity, Episcopal priest and author Sarah Condon (2017) jests, “there are not a tremendous number of women out there who will preach about the death and resurrection of Jesus with the boldness, assuredness, and utter orthodoxy of the Rev. Mrs. Fleming Rutledge. You can’t blame us ordained ladies entirely for that. The Episcopal Church started allowing for women priests in the 1970s. You know, when affirmational culture was just hitting its stride and people were dancing to ABBA.”
12. In his letter to the Galatians, perhaps the central New Testament text for apocalyptic theology, Paul uses a synonym (*erchomai*, “to come on the scene”) for the verb *apokalypthēnai* with reference to Christ or the Gospel. As Ernesto Grassi (1980) writes, “in the word is revealed that which breaks through the symbolic functional circle of biological life” (111).
13. A concept that pertains here but lies beyond the scope of the essay is the Greek *kerygma*, proclamation. It is the nominal form of the preaching (*kerusso*) of a herald (*keryx*) according to the New Testament. In relation to the principle that the Gospel is the “good news” (*euangelion*), *kerygma* is preaching that delivers the Gospel. More specifically, it announces rather than describes or explains the Gospel (Kennedy 1980, 127–28, 1984, 6–7).
14. This act, Rutledge (2015) writes elsewhere, “was not an inevitable final stage in an orderly process, or an accumulation of progressive steps toward a goal; it was a dramatic rescue bid into which God has flung his entire self” (355).
15. An interesting comparison here is Stephanie Martin’s (2015) analysis of the ministry of “seeker friendly” mega-churches. Martin writes, “overt mentions of sin” were “notably absent” from her sample sermons (48).
16. It is noteworthy that Lawless (1998) characterizes “the mainline denominations in this country” in terms of how contemporary “women preachers rely, in their sermons, on women’s narratives, women’s experiences, women’s ways of knowing who God is as a way to ‘tell the other half of the story.’” As our comparative analysis shows, this is much different from Rutledge’s homiletic model.
17. Robert Terrill’s (2001) analysis of Malcolm X’s “The Ballot or the Bullet” includes a comparison between prophetic and apocalyptic rhetoric in the history of African American protest. Arguing that Malcolm X effectively integrated prophecy and prudence, Terrill notes the complexity of urging integration against the assumption of “the inevitable and cataclysmic end of the oppressor” (28).
18. Timmerman’s argument that Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Peace Address from 1934 relies on a prophetic voice is particularly interesting for our purposes since, as Timmerman notes, Bonhoeffer was influenced theologically by Barth.
19. In “The Subject of the Verb” Rutledge similarly superordinates divine agency, noting that “What’s missing in so much mainline preaching [is] . . . a sense of a living God. . . . The subject in so much of our preaching is ourselves – our faith, our ‘spirituality,’ our works, our journeys, our responsibilities, our needs, our ministries.” “This problem,”

Rutledge says, “has been on my heart and mind for some years now.” Comparatively uninvested in human potential, apocalyptic preaching proclaims the powerlessness of Christians in relation to the God that intervenes and comes to be known through homiletic unveiling.

20. This non-hortatory approach reflects apocalypticism’s presumption that the cosmic battle between good and evil is not dependent in any way on individual human action. Being “good” in a conventional sense, or living as a “good Christian,” is not objectionable in the apocalyptic framework, but it is neither the consequence nor the determinant of salvation.
21. As the biblical adage goes, a prophet is unwelcomed in his/her own community. See John 4:44, Mark 6:4, Matthew 13:57, and Luke 4:24.
22. See also Romans 3:21–22.
23. Rutledge (2015) writes elsewhere, “The apocalyptic emphasis on the triumph of God celebrates not only God’s initiative in Christ but also God’s coming victory in Christ. This is the already/not-yet perspective of the New Testament that must always be held in balance” (389). According to Rutledge, apocalyptic theology “holds in view two things at once: the ‘present evil age’ of violence and cruelty, greed and avarice, disease and death; and the age to come, known to us in the mode of promise and guaranteed by the Holy Spirit” (356–57). See also Kermode (1966, 8).
24. If, as Gunn and Beard claim, both Brummett (1991) and O’Leary (1994) “locate the appeal of apocalyptic in a narrative structure” (Gunn and Beard 2000, 270), potential insights might be derived from the distinction we make here between apocalyptic narrative and apocalyptic homiletics. The former, we submit, is a story in which human activity plays a significant role relative to the end of the world; whereas the latter participates in the disclosive, unfolding, becoming event of the divine.
25. Regarding the armor of God, see Ephesians 6:10.
26. In this practice, Rutledge’s apocalyptic preaching follows the Anglican lectionary, which assigns biblical passages to particular weeks in the Christian calendar.
27. See Isaiah 2:4.
28. Drawing on Barth, Ziegler (2018) calls this “the inviolate particularity of the incarnation” (20).
29. This is the opposite of the individualism that Martin (2015) identifies in American “mega-churches.” The notion of “choosing personal salvation” is nonsensical within apocalyptic theology (46).
30. See “What Is Your Battle Station?” As Ziegler (2018) writes, “Hearing the apocalyptic gospel drives us to see the cosmic scope of divine salvation in the recovery, liberation, and transformation of the whole creation” (29).
31. Reid’s intriguing essay triangulates rhetorical form, theological truth, and historical emergence of faith communities. He proposes to “assess the relationship between the assumptions concerning truth that structure a sermon’s strategy of persuasion and the stage or cultural consciousness of faith likely to be constructed over time by sermons making use of that approach to preaching” (166–67). Reid, too, identifies Craddock’s *As One Without Authority* as “the book that galvanized [a] paradigmatic shift” (169). It is telling that he places Barth, Augustine, Hauerwas, and Willimon in the “thoroughly postmodern” category, noting that “in many ways, Thoroughly Postmodern approaches to preaching are like Traditional approaches in the way they resist letting experience externalize truth” (171–72). Although we disagree wholly with the conclusions that Reid eventually draws, the opportunity seems to us ripe for comparative explorations between postmodern hermeneutics and homiletics that reflect non-human agency. See, for example, Kisner (1989).
32. See John 3:8.

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