



**The Gas of the Gospel:**  
**A Conversation on Preaching**  
**with Cynthia Hale and Jared Alcantara**  
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Mark Ramsey: This is Mark Ramsey of the Ministry Collaborative, getting the absolute joy today to talk to Cynthia Hale and Jared Alcantara about preaching. I'd like both of you just to introduce yourselves a little bit – where are you located in ministry – and then we'll dive in. Cynthia, why don't you go first?

Cynthia Hale: Thanks, Mark. I'm Cynthia Hale, the Senior Pastor of the Ray of Hope Christian Church in Decatur, Georgia. I'm excited to be with Jared today, and to have this conversation.

Jared Alcantara: This is Jared Alcantara, and right back at you; it's a joy and honor to be with you. I teach at Baylor University's George W. Truitt Theological Seminary in Waco, Texas. I've taught here since 2018, and then taught at a seminary called TEDS before that, and then served churches in Oregon and New Jersey and Massachusetts and Illinois. So, I have a very patient spouse. We've lived in many places.

Mark: So I actually asked pastors in our network just today: "So, I'm talking to these two wonderful people. What should I ask?" And one of the first questions that came back is, "In a world drowning in content and starving for presence, what does only preaching know how to do?"

Cynthia: Preaching knows how to bring God strangely near, to make God real for us in our present context, in any context. And I am privileged to have the opportunity to preach to people who want and need to hear, and see, and feel, experience God in a real way. And preaching gives us that opportunity to do that.

Jared: When Walter Brueggemann came to Baylor, he said the Hebrew prophets engaged in a ministry of truth-telling and hope-bringing. But the problem was that people didn't want either of those things. They didn't want truth-telling, because who wants to be told the truth to themselves about themselves? And, in a way, they didn't want hope-bringing, in the sense that they didn't believe it was realistic. Because if you're in exile in Babylon, then you think, "How would it ever be possible for me to be able to return to the Promised Land?" Nevertheless, that's what preachers do. They engage in truth-telling, and they engage in hope-bringing, and they are included in the call to zoom out from the tyranny of the moment.

Cynthia: I'm glad you said that, Jared, because I just preached this Sunday about Daniel and his three friends, and the fact that Nebuchadnezzar threatened them if they didn't bow down before this golden statue that he had made of himself, they would be exterminated in a blazing fire. And they said to him, "Be it known to you, old king, that we will not bow. Our God is able to deliver us. Here's the truth. But if not, if God chooses not to do that..." Now, that's the truth that people don't want to hear. If that's the truth, I don't want to hear it. I don't really want to preach at this moment, but I must, because that's the truth. That's allowing God to be who God is. God may not give us what we want, when we want it, how we want it. That's the sovereignty of God. And if we really trust God, then we'll go with that. It may be tough, but we'll have to learn how to say, "But if not."

Mark: You reference a deep well of Scriptural knowledge, knowledge of tradition. How do we preach these days to congregations and to overhearers who are less and less steeped in the Biblical word, in the traditions of faith? How does that change the trajectory of preaching?

Jared: I remember hearing a pastor from New York say, "Whenever I talk about Abraham and Sarah, I have to assume that some people think they're new members at our church." So, it's good to remember that there's going to be people who are, of course, de-churched and those who are churchless, un-churched, who have no real point of reference.

There's a great book by Michael Brothers called *Distance in Preaching*. He teaches at Princeton Seminary. And he tells the story of his daughter inviting a friend to church, and they started singing in choir rehearsals. And then the un-churched daughter invites her un-churched dad to hear her sing in the choir on Easter. You know, he doesn't know when to sit and stand, it's kind of the classic story. But during the scripture reading, when the angel announces to Mary that Christ is risen, but before that she says, "They've taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they've laid him."

And the Father turned to the daughter and said, "What happened to him?"

So, the Father didn't know what happened to him. So, for that person, the resurrection story, Resurrection Sunday, was entirely new.

So, it's good for us as preachers to reflect on that, to remember that, to consider that there's going to be more and more people, not less people, as the 21st century continues, who don't have that point of reference. It's good for us to hold on to the message of Isaiah 40, which is repeated in 1 Peter 1, "The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God endures forever."

So, we still hold to a main source of our strength, remembering that certain things will fade, will not endure, but the word of God does endure. And then we also contextualize, remembering that there's going to be people who are un-churched, de-churched, over-churched, people who have a pseudo-Christianity that needs to be interrogated. All of those things we have to consider when we contextualize now, and in the future.

Cynthia: Well, that is what makes it exciting for me. I started a new church 40 years ago, and I have all of the above in my church today, are coming to the church, and some of them over-churched. And I continue to tell the same story. Sometimes I say to them, "I have nothing new to say." It's the same Word. I just try to say it in fresh, new, and different ways. But for me, it's energizing and exciting at times; not always, now, I got to be honest, to be able to just tell the simple story. And one of the greatest compliments that I receive from members of my church, especially when the children are able to be in worship with us, they tell me, "Pastor, I understood everything you said."

And I said, "Good. Then that means your parents and your grandparents got it, too." It's a reminder of the faith that we have in these simple stories about God in Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and how they live among us, and work among us, and work in us and through us. And so, I think it really does challenge us as preachers to be open and engaged with the word.

As a matter of fact, one of the things that I do every year is to read through the Bible, cover to cover, Genesis to Revelation, and to just take my time. Some portions are more interesting than others. This year, it's amazing, because Leviticus really excited me. I don't know what it was. I need to hear the Law.

Since we're dealing in a culture where there is no rule of law, I needed some law. To be able to really get in touch with that portion of the scriptures as much as I do Exodus. I love Exodus, and the end of the bondage and the journey.

Mark: Wow. In your sense, how does preaching today connect the pastor in personal relationship to the people to whom they're preaching, or is preaching a more separate enterprise from the pastoral care that's located in one-to-one relationships? I think this has become a particular point of pressure in faith communities right now, as there's so much trenchant need for social justice to be mobilized; and yet the congregation where I worship, I'm looking at people who I know their personal struggles along with that. So how does that interplay work: pastoral care, and yet a larger scope?

Cynthia: One of the things that I try to do is balance the two. There are some Sundays when I am dealing primarily with the needs of the people within the congregation, but I may even have some simple or small reference to what is going on in the larger world. I think it's always important that we speak to the people where they live and move and have their being; but also connect them to the larger world, to help them to understand that we have a responsibility as Christians. Though we are hurting or struggling, we could be what Henri Nouwen calls "wounded healers", and we have a responsibility and a privilege to minister to others, even as we struggle with our own grief and pain and disappointment and abandonment.

Jared: A mentor of mine from the past, who used to coach me on preaching, he would tell me that one of the beauties of preaching is that it's an opportunity for Biblical teaching, proclamation, leadership, and pastoral care to come together in one moment. At the same time that I say that, we don't want preaching to replace those things as separate entities as well. So, we're called to lead outside the pulpit. We're called to provide pastoral care outside the pulpit. We're called to engage in a ministry of proclamation beyond the pulpit.

I see in preaching an opportunity to really engage in significant soul care. One of the reasons why the church fathers and mothers were called the doctors of the church is because they understood their task as pastors and as preachers as a ministry of soul care, of pastoral care, that included just like what a doctor would say is, "There's something that's got to change in your diet in order for you to be able to live and thrive." So that is included in soul care, but there's also the gentle caring approach to soul care that is patient with people, and is not impatient with them.

When it comes to the call to social justice, to Biblical justice, since that's a Biblical word and Biblical category, that's where that opportunity to lead is so necessary, to invite people into the work and witness of God in the world, to look out for what God is up to. When John the Baptist was in prison in Matthew 11, his followers come and say, "Are you the one who is to come or should we expect someone else?"

Jesus' reply is, "The blind see, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, good news is preached to the poor." So, we have a ministry of verbal proclamation, and then we also have God's work and witness in the world coming together. "Blessed is anyone who does not fall away on account of me." So, there's this encouragement to engage in both, from Jesus, and that's the message that he wants to send back to John in his discouragement.

Cynthia: My home church in Roanoke, Virginia, Loudon Avenue Christian Church, when we entered the sanctuary, there's a sign that says, "Enter to Worship." When we left, "Depart to Serve." That's exactly

what you were just saying. I mean, there's that sweet balance that we come in to worship, to be healed, to be nurtured, to be loved, to be cared for, to be revived, whatever the need is, and then we depart to serve in the world.

Mark: And I've almost always envisioned that as almost an elastic band. We're propelled out, but when we deplete ourselves out there, we're propelled back in, propelled back out, propelled back in. I think that's the Christian life at its best, if we can do that.

Cynthia: I agree with you. I think that's why people come to church, because they're depleted, they're empty, they need to be refilled. And to be honest with you, so do we as preachers and pastors. And so, we're always having to find ways that we can be replenished, so that we can continually give out. There are some Sundays when I have not found that place during the week. And if I'm honest, I ain't got nothing to say, and, I mean, ain't got nothing. So, I have to really, really, really trust the Holy Spirit to speak through me.

Jared: One of the things that comes up over and over again in class, or whenever doing workshops out in churches, is the need for people to hear some good news from time to time, since they hear bad news all the other days during the week, and the need to be refueled. So, a phrase that comes up in our classes is: "the gas of the gospel drives the car of obedience." So, if we're going to enter to worship and exit to serve, then we need some fuel to serve. We need something to remind us of who we are, of who God is, of the strange, the peculiar capacity of the Gospel to empower us to do things that we could never do on our own. And we need to be raised again again; again, again and again, so that we'll be able to serve and lead, and have a winsome witness in the world.

Cynthia: You know, I hate to admit that, Jared, that when I left seminary and went to pastor, I was a legalist and a moralist, a perfectionist, and I preached those kinds of sermons. I kept telling people how to get right, how to stay right, you don't have to sin, that kind of thing. It was pastoring that taught me how to be more caring and graceful in my preaching. Because when I realized what the needs of my people were, when I was honest about my own needs in the life of that congregation, then I learned how to balance, and how to give people more good news: that God is a loving, forgiving God, even when we messed up, and constantly gives us another chance. And it helped me to deal with my own sense of pride in preaching.

Mark: Wow. You've both begun to touch on this, but I'm interested. When did you know in your journey that preaching was going to be a vocation? How did that start in both of you?

Jared: I'll never forget something from middle school, some kind of talent show. And I was asked my choice was to do something oratorical or something. And by the end, a couple of my friends were chanting, "Preacher, preacher." I wasn't even saved yet. I didn't even know what I didn't know. And that's a wonderful thing about God's prevenient grace, that God's grace is working in the lives of people who don't even know it yet.

Conversion happened at the age of 14. I'd say the call to preach happened 18, 19, when I was working with youth. I was barely older than they were, but had opportunities to preach and to teach from a very early age. And then, you know, Calvin talks about the inward call and the outward call. So, there's my own sense, but then there's also the confirmation from the church that this is something we see in you, that we believe you're called to. So, I had lots of encouragement from pastors, leaders, professors who

said, "We see this in you and believe in you." And have been doing this for about 30 years now. And God is faithful. God is good.

Cynthia: I gave my life to Christ at nine years of. And, then I started teaching at my high school, Bible study in the morning. I stopped teaching because a young man who I led to Christ said, "Women should not usurp authority over men."

And I said, "I'm not a woman and you're not a man."

But, I did shut up for a minute, until I got to college and my college chaplain said, "You have the gifts and graces for ministry."

I said, "But, I'm a woman." So he brought in a woman for me to see. And then I preached my first sermon at Hollins University, 52 years ago. When I went to seminary, I was scared to death, but I knew that I was called to preach, and the rest is history. I've been preaching ever since and I won't stop preaching.

Mark: This has been such a rich conversation. What's a Biblical text that's filling you right now?

Cynthia: Jeremiah 1:4-5. "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I set you apart. I appointed you as a prophet to the nations. 'Ah, sovereign Lord,' I said, 'I do not know what to say.' 'Do not tell me that you don't know what to say.'"

Jeremiah said, "I'm only a youth." I would say, "I'm only a woman", but every time I begin to doubt whether or not I'm making a difference, I know that God called me.

Jared: For me, it would be that combination of Isaiah 40 and 1 Peter 1. Both are so powerful to me. There's this voice crying in the wilderness, but the question comes back: "And what shall I cry?"

If you read through the verses before, "The grass withers, the flowers fade, all people are like grass. All people are like the flowers of the field that fade." And the language that's used there is that those things "fall". They don't just fade, they fall. So, when we say, "The Word of our God endures", that word there is "stands". So, everything else falls, but the Word of God stands forever.

So then, when I go to 1 Peter 1, and I hear, "You've been sown with a seed that is not perishable, but imperishable, then that's the Word that was preached to you," That's what gives me hope during a really turbulent time.Carolynn Ann Knight, she has said it for many years now; she's still saying it. "It's a great time to be a preacher." It's a great time to call people out of that turbulence, and to remind them of the things that stand and that endure.

But that's what I'm preaching to myself right now. I'm reminding myself that humanity's frail and fragile, and that even human faithfulness can be interrogated. Things that we think we can rely on, we might not be able to rely on. Nevertheless, there is something that stands through it all, that stands forever. So, that's what encourages me, and the work that I do as a preacher of the gospel; and then also as someone who's training the next generation, I want them to be able to hold onto the things that stand and endure as well.

Mark: Yeah. No, amen. It's a great time to be a preacher. It is a great time to be the church of Jesus Christ in the world. At our best, we are made for times like this. And thank you for putting so much light and hope and challenge into that perspective with our conversation. Thank you both. Really appreciate it.

Cynthia: Thank you.

Jared: The honor's mine. Thank you.