Light Art, Street Art, and the Art of Preaching:
Sound-and-Light Shows as Public Proclamation

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Abstract

This article examines how the phenomenon of sound-and-light shows fulfills the purposes of preaching and, as such, can be perceived as a form of public proclamation. Originating in France but now offered all over the world, these shows use large-scale video projection to display images on the facades of historic buildings, many of which are religious in nature, set to sound effects and music. The author begins by addressing three purposes of preaching that arise within homiletical discourse: testimony of God’s story, empowering transformation, and engendering encounters with God. Drawing from recent qualitative research into spectators’ experiences at sound-and-light shows, the author then examines how three specific shows serve as case studies that demonstrate that, while not sermons, they can indeed fulfill each of the purposes of preaching. As such, these spectacles can be seen as a vibrant form of proclamation amidst contemporary public settings.

Since their beginnings in France in the middle of the twentieth century, sound-and-light shows (or spectacles son et lumière) have grown into an international phenomenon. These popular shows use digital projection (sometimes called video-mapping) to cast images onto the facades of historic buildings – many of which are religious, like cathedrals and abbeys – to tell tales and capture the imagination through displays of light with images set to music and story. Worship services inside such historical churches might attract only a handful of people, but large crowds gather outside for these light shows, many of which include elements of Christian theology, history, and liturgy.

Throughout the summer of 2019, the city of Orléans offered a light show on the Gothic Sainte-Croix Cathedral that told the story of Saint Joan of Arc, from her humble beginning in rural France to her ongoing legacy throughout the country. I visited this city as part of a larger qualitative study into the experiences of spectators at sound-and-light shows and how such shows might impact their religious and spiritual lives. As I stood amidst a large crowd watching the show, I was struck by a scene that arose toward the end, which featured a montage depicting Joan’s legacy through the use of images that appeared like graffiti. Gradually the front of the flamboyant cathedral became covered in a collage of spray-painted lines and colours depicting Joan, Jesus, and
many other images. With this scene lighting up the night sky, I couldn’t help but wonder how sound-and-light shows might serve as a form of Christian proclamation in the public square.

The digitally-mediated graffiti projected onto the stone and glass of the cathedral called to mind Adam Hearlson’s likening of homiletical theology to street art. Homiletical theology, he argues, is a sort of “theological vandalism” that, like street art, “is by nature public, impermanent, and provisional.” If, as Hearlson compellingly argues, homiletical theology is like street art, could sound-and-light shows be considered a form of homiletical theology? More specifically, could they in some way fulfill the purposes of preaching in contemporary public contexts? In this article I answer this question by drawing from the results of the qualitative research I undertook into the experiences of spectators at sound-and-light shows. I begin by outlining three broad purposes for preaching offered by contemporary homileticians, each of which is related to one of the characteristics of street art described by Hearlson. I then use three sound-and-light shows, each of which I interpret from a different angle, as case studies to demonstrate how these nighttime spectacles can fulfill these purposes of preaching and, thus, can indeed be considered a contemporary form of homiletical theology proclaimed within the public square.

1. Purposeful Proclamation

O. C. Edwards Jr. opens his *A History of Preaching* by declaring that “most Christian bodies consider the proclamation of the Word of God to be the constitutive act of the church. No other major religion gives preaching quite the central role that it has in Christianity.” Preaching is a ubiquitous feature of Christianity, a defining characteristic of the worship lives of our faith communities. But why does preaching matter? What are its purposes? While complete consensus may be beyond the realm of possibility, there are three points of convergence at which multiple perspectives intersect: preaching testifies to God’s story, it empowers transformation, and it evokes encounters with God.4

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2 Ibid., 47.


4 I am certainly not the first person to identify these three broad purposes for preaching. Paul Scott Wilson, for instance, writes in his introductory textbook on preaching that “preaching is an event in which the congregation hears God’s word, meets their Savior, and is transformed through the power of the Holy Spirit to be the kind of community God intends.” Paul Scott Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching*, rev. ed., Nashville (TN) 2007, 5. Likewise, Roger Standing’s argument that through preaching “truth is expressed, the heart is inspired, and the will is engaged” is deeply related to the three purposes I lay out in this article. Roger Standing, *Mediated Preaching*. Homiletics in Contemporary British Culture, in: The Future of Preaching, ed. Geoffrey Stevenson, London 2010, 9–26, 22.
1.1 Preaching as Testimony of God’s Story

A first point of convergence surrounds the role of preaching in the proclamation of God’s story, an act that harkens to the public nature of street art in the witness it offers to the gathered community. Preaching has an intimate relationship with scripture, for the Bible is the primary source of all utterances from the pulpit. All that a preacher says and does has any weight because it is founded upon and emerges from our texts that we hold to be sacred. Without scripture, without telling and interpreting God’s story revealed in the Bible, preaching is merely opinion and conjecture, a motivational speech or a damning tirade born out of and remaining within the experiences of humanity. Anna Carter Florence’s work is central to understanding the testimonial nature of preaching. In Preaching as Testimony she writes, “the preacher tells what she has seen and heard in the biblical text and in life, and then confesses what she believes about it.”

Going further, however, the testimony of the preacher doesn’t stop at testifying to the God of scripture. Preaching also testifies to God’s ongoing story as it has unfolded throughout history among people and in places not recounted in scripture yet among which God has certainly been at work. Preaching bears witness to God in the here and now as it connects the twin poles of the biblical text and contemporary life. The homiletical task is one of making connections between God as revealed in our sacred texts and God as revealed in the world around us, both past and present. As such, preaching is nothing less than, as Doug Pagitt proclaims, “the act of people being led more deeply into the story of God,” a story found within the pages of scripture, the canon of history, and the world in which we live.

1.2 Preaching as Empowerment for Transformation

Preaching is not testimony for the sake of testimony. It is, as Phil Snider has written, to “invite listeners to faithfully imagine, embody, and experience the transformation harbored in the gospel of Christ.” To testify to God’s story and lead people more deeply into it is to challenge the

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5 Anna Carter Florence, Preaching as Testimony, Louisville (KY) 2007, xiii.
7 Doug Pagitt, Preaching in the Inventive Age, Nashville (TN) 2014, 151.
community—preacher included—toward positive transformation through the power of God. In this way, the sermon moves from an act of imagination alone to an act of embodiment. Like street art, preaching is provisional in that, rather than being a static, untouchable entity, it is offered to the community with the expectation and hope that those who hear the message will do something with it.

Preaching can evoke transformation in a myriad of ways and at multiple levels. For one thing, it has the power to transform the one who proclaims. It’s not enough for preachers to climb the stairs to the pulpit and exude eloquence and passion to stir their hearers toward transformation. Preachers must first listen to how God is calling them to be shaped and reshaped. In her well-known homiletical memoir The Preaching Life, Barbara Brown Taylor recounts that preaching is a mystical endeavour, an experience of transformation among both preacher and faith community in which “the ordinary details of [our] everyday lives are translated into the extraordinary elements of God’s ongoing creation.” With this we come to a third level of transformation, that through which those transformed – preacher and hearer alike – in turn engage in action that transforms the world in light of their encounter with God’s story. Preaching does not only evoke alternative ways of thinking and of perceiving the world; it also creates an alternative world.

1.3 Preaching as Encounter with God

Preaching is, finally, a means by which the community encounters God. This claim is not universally held, and among those who do plant their flag within this camp, there is no consensus about how preaching engenders experiences with God. Yet homileticians across several Christian traditions claim that God is present in the moment of the sermon.

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12 Ronald Allen, for example, states clearly that while sermons can help us relate to God, “we do not encounter God directly” through preaching. Ronald J. Allen, Preaching and Postmodernism, in: Interpretation 55, no. 1 (2001), 34–48, 41.
Although the Catechism of the Catholic Church does not name the homily as a manifestation of Christ’s presence in the Mass,¹³ some Catholic theologians argue that it can indeed be a locus for encountering God in the liturgy. Thomas Scirighi, for instance, proposes that preaching offers “a special opportunity to meet the living Lord,”¹⁴ thus naming the homily as sacramental. Within mainline Protestantism, Karl Barth offers a clear example of preaching as an encounter with God, arguing that through God’s grace human proclamation of God’s Word becomes a medium through which God addresses God’s people.¹⁵ In his words, “preaching is not merely a proclamation of human ideas and convictions, but, like the existence of Jesus Christ Himself, like the testimony of the prophets and apostles on which it is founded and by which it lives, it is God’s own proclamation.”¹⁶ Within the Anglican Communion there is consensus among some that, while not a sacrament, the preached word is sacramental in nature by its transforming of the ordinary materiality of human speech into something greater through which God’s presence breaks through our reality.¹⁷ Finally, while evangelical Protestants are less likely to see preaching as a means for encountering God, there are some within this diverse body who uphold this claim. Donald English and Cleophus LaRue may believe God to be indirectly present in the sermon,¹⁸ but Willette Alyce Burgie-Bryant holds that “Christian preaching is ideally a manifestation of God’s own Presence, with power to have temporal impact from an eternal point of origin.”¹⁹ Although the claim that God can be encountered within the sermon is controversial, theologians from many traditions agree that the transcendent presence of God can break through in the homiletical moment. Through the power of God, preaching can evoke a holy encounter, an impermanent experience that, similar to street art, might last for a moment but the effects of which reverberate throughout time.

¹⁵ Karl Barth, Homiletics, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels, Louisville (KY) 1991, 44.
¹⁶ Idem, Church Dogmatics 1/2, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight, Edinburgh 1956, 746.
2. Projected Proclamation

Over a six-month period in 2019, I visited twelve sound-and-light shows – eight in France, two in Jerusalem, and one each in Prague and Durham (UK) – to learn about how they affect the spiritual and religious lives of the members of the public who attend them. Eight were stand-alone shows and four were part of multi-day digital/light art festivals. Each was displayed on a historical Christian building, such as a cathedral, parish church, or abbey, except for the show in Jerusalem, which were offered inside the courtyard of the Tower of David. Every show included explicit religious and spiritual elements through their themes, the ways they used the architecture of the religious building on which they were projected, or a combination thereof. At each site I distributed postcards to spectators that contained information about the study and an invitation to complete an online survey about their experience of the show. I also conducted about a dozen interviews with spectators and local clergy of churches on which these shows are projected.

While this research indicates that sound-and-light shows can have positive effects on the spiritual and religious lives of spectators, the data generated also demonstrates that these shows serve as a contemporary form of theological proclamation within the public square. Certainly, they are not sermons in the traditional sense; yet by using sound-and-light shows as case studies, it becomes evident that they can indeed fulfill the three purposes of preaching that I described earlier. In the remainder of this article, I will make such an argument by drawing from three interpretive layers pursued during this research. First, I explore the testimony of God’s story by discussing the show at Orléans through an examination of the show itself. I will then address the purpose of empowering transformation by considering the experience of a spectator at a show in Jerusalem. Finally, I will mine my own reflexive engagement with the show at Mont-Saint-Michel to address the homiletical purpose of encountering God.

2.1 Public Testimony in Orléans

During the summer of 2019 the French city of Orléans offered a sound-and-light show about Saint Joan of Arc, “the Maid of Orléans” who saved the city from the English in the early fifteenth century. Titled “Jeanne, la force de l’âme” (“Joan: Strength of Soul”), the show took viewers on a journey through the life and legacy of this celebrity saint, from her calling that came through the voices of Saints Michael the Archangel and Catherine of Seina to her ongoing legacy throughout France. While not a biblical story, this show testifies to the ongoing saga of God in the world. Joan was, after all, not simply a great military leader; she was a person of deep faith who followed God’s call in her life, a call that ultimately ended with her martyrdom in Rouen at around nineteen years
of age. While some shows are infused with religious meaning through their use of the Christian art and architecture built into the cathedrals, this one served up an extra helping of Christianity through the explicit telling of a story lifted from the vaults of church history.

The 16-minute show begins as vines rise along the wall of the seven-century-old Sainte-Croix Cathedral, highlighting the walls between porticos and window as they grow and flower until the whole facade is covered with foliage. As they fade, a warm yellow light appears on the upper gallery and the silhouette of a young Joan appears. With soft music in the background, the whispers of a man and woman echo in the night. Jeanne. Jeanne. Jeanne. As they continue calling the young girl’s name, the silhouetted Joan wanders along the gallery as if on a balcony, her head moving left and right as she searches for the voices calling her by name. She appears in the north tower as if peering out a window before walking along the gables above the portals. Light begins to radiate down from the towers, illuminating the entire building in gold and orange as an enormous Joan rises, now clad in a suit of armour, having answered the call of God.

As the scene changes the cathedral is depicted as if created entirely by enormous pieces of stained glass that shine majestically until shattered to symbolize the English invasion of Orléans. When every piece of glass has fallen the facade, now in darkness, becomes engulfed in larger-than-life chains. Eventually a sword strikes and breaks the chains as Joan, illuminated by light behind her like an aureola, walks toward the centre of the scene, her body as high as the building. As she pushes the darkness away the cathedral dazzles in colour once again as trumpets sound and cheers ring out. The Maid of Orléans has saved the people—all because she followed the voice of God.

The story does not end there. The silhouetted heroine is pictured on horseback in front of the rose window, the speakers pumping out a contemporary upbeat tune as she rides across the landscape. Scenery unfolds across the stone structure to convey not only her movement across the countryside, but her spirit as it moves forward in time. Rather than speaking about a life cut short at the stake, the show glorifies the ongoing legacy of this saint, her positive response to God’s call resulting in actions still reverberating throughout the land now, many years later. Colours move across the cathedral as the spray-paint-like images of which I spoke in the introduction to this article gradually appear: the sacred heart of Jesus, an image of a young Joan, a resurrected haloed Christ, and a street sign bearing the heroine’s name are tagged on this masterpiece of Gothic architecture. As another scene change unfolds, a library appears, books open, and the facade becomes covered with letters of the alphabet that move and shift until Joan’s face is depicted. All sorts of voices can be heard offering short words of homage about the legacy of this teenager’s
faith. Then, without warning, a light illuminates the rose window and radiates out to the whole building as a woman’s voice sings these words over and over: “You can do anything.”

This sound-and-light show is one of many that speak to the first purpose of preaching. It joins those in Le Puy, Chartres, Le Mans, Amiens, Mont-Saint-Michel, and Jerusalem to testify to God’s story as told in scripture and in the ongoing life of the church throughout the centuries. In fact, with so many shows of this nature, the public testimony to God’s story is by far the most salient of the three purposes of preaching among the sound-and-light shows I visited. Whether offering a biblical narrative or a story from church history, the lights that dance across these buildings bear witness to God’s presence and activity in the world.

This telling of Joan’s calling and ongoing legacy does more than simply recount the story; it invites spectators to enter the story. Like a Sunday morning sermon, it speaks to what God has done in the world, in this case how God used a young peasant girl to free her fellow citizens. But it goes further than just offering a story set in a particular era of time. In its depiction of Joan’s ride across the centuries, in the spray-painted walls and streets named in her honour, in the spoken words that pay tribute to her life, and in the reminder that “you can do anything” that you are called to do, the show bears witness to the ongoing saga of God. Viewers are prompted to ask how the strength of Joan’s faith-based action lives on today in those who stand up for what is right and just. This, of course, is a mark of good preaching. Theologians like Cleophus LaRue and Ruth Duck remind us that sermons tell God’s story and invite us into it by connecting it with our lives and the world in which we live.\(^{20}\) In this way the projected proclamation of the show in Orléans becomes nothing short of prophetic – which Walter Brueggemann identifies as the crux of Christian preaching\(^{21}\) – as it dares us to imagine that anything is possible for those who, like Joan, search for God’s voice as it calls to them in the night.

2.2 Provisional Transformation in Jerusalem

The city of Jerusalem hardly needs an introduction. As a sacred site for Jews, Christians, and Muslims, religion and spirituality are infused into the stones with which the city is built. At the west end of the Old Town, rising from the cityscape next to Jaffa Gate, is the Tower of David, a citadel that dates back over 2000 years. Visitors to Jerusalem can purchase tickets for two sound-and-light shows that use over 20 projectors to illuminate nearly all the walls of citadel’s courtyard.

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20 LaRue, The Heart of Black Preaching (note 18), 13 and Duck (note 6), 139.
One show tells the story of Jerusalem and the other recounts the life of King David. I conducted research at both of these shows for a week in September 2019. One spectator (I’ll call her Julia) offered responses in the online questionnaire about her experience of the King David show that demonstrates that these types of shows can provoke the sort of transformation imagined in the second purpose of preaching.

Throughout the show, the story of King David unfolds on the walls around the crowd seated in the corner of the courtyard. Using short quotes from scripture that appear at the top of a tower, scenes follow the progression of David’s life as recordings of actors and artists’ renderings of scenery blend together to full orchestral music. The show depicts David playing a flute as he tends his sheep, Samuel anointing the boy, and his triumph over Goliath. As the Philistine army disperses the walls become covered in lush foliage as David and Jonathan walk together amidst the pastoral scenery. The story continues as David plays his harp as his kingdom is established to the cheers of the ancient Israelites, that is, until he watches Bathsheba bathing and playing cards fall from the sky, with only the king of spades remaining on the wall. A passage of scriptures reads “And David dwelt in the citadel, and called it the city of David… and David waxed greater and greater” (2Chron 11:7, 9). Finally, a regal David dressed in fine robes appears and looks over his city until the crowd is left with an invocation to pray for the peace and prosperity of Jerusalem.

The content of this show certainly offers further evidence for the testimony they can offer to the story of God. Yet Julia’s experience serves as a case study in how they can also empower transformation in the lives of spectators. While she expected it to simply be a form of entertainment, Julia found that the show was a means for going deeper in her faith. She was raised in the Roman Catholic Church but she clearly states that she is not a member of a religious tradition and does not consider herself to be religious. Yet she indicated that spirituality is somewhat important in her life, being careful to distinguish it from organized religion.

The King David show was the second one Julia had seen in Jerusalem; she had attended the “Night Spectacular” show that offered a visual history of the city a few days earlier. For reasons she struggled to put into words, the King David show was more meaningful to her. “The colors, effects, the stories with the sounds - all of them on those old, historical walls” blended together into a deeply meaningful experience. It became more than simply a pleasant way to spend an evening in the Holy City. This was clear in the frustration she felt at the “impatience and disrespect” of tourists who pushed and shoved in the queue or spoke loudly and used flash photography during the show (the latter of which was expressly forbidden).
The fact that Julia said these behaviours “ruined a little the feeling the show gave to me” speaks to the depth of her experience and the connection she felt during the production. Her experience witnesses to the power that can be evoked by the blending of light, sound, and story all playing out on a building infused with historical and religious significance. In her words, “I don’t know if it’s about the show or where it took place – in Jerusalem, the old Town, where ‘everything’ is about the religious – it gave a special feeling while I was watching a spectacular light show about David’s life—stories from the Bible and historical events.” The saga of David came alive for her, as did the living today who claim David as part of their religious heritage, with whom Julia now felt a sense of connection²²: “I'm not sure, if I can explain this feeling, but as you can feel this atmosphere meanwhile you're getting closer to the people who live there by getting to know them better through their history and little parts of the base of their culture, you can feel more connected to the others.”

Julia was clear that the King David show resonated with her on a spiritual level, causing her to leave the citadel in a different manner than she had entered it. Her encounter with the story and the people who hold fast to it stirred something inside of her that led to a change of thought and behaviour. Throughout her four days in Israel and the Palestinian Territories she became fascinated by all that had happened in this land over the years, especially those commemorated in the Bible. On her last night in Jerusalem, as she watched the life of King David play out through that sound-and-light show, she made a decision to go deeper into this experience and learn more. Writing in the questionnaire she states, “I have to tell you that since I left Israel I started to watch movies about biblical stories and people. I just wanted to know more about them—the people, the base of the religion, the stories … And first I decided it during this light show, because I didn't recognize every scene then. And I don't consider myself as a religious person.” While it is not a dramatic moment of conversion, Julia’s experience of the sound-and-light show speaks to the sort of delight of which Saint Augustine writes in his book about preaching, one that inspires people to do something with what they have heard.²³ In her case, the show provoked her to take intentional action to better understand the stories of scripture and the people who hold fast to them.

The King David show ends with call to action, a petition to pray for the peace and prosperity of Jerusalem. Much like a good sermon, it asks the participant to do something as a result of their

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²³ Augustine (note 10), 117–119.
experience. For Julia, the show was a call to explore further the land and people of the Bible. While the show may not have prompted her to join a church, for a person who does not engage in any sort of religious practices, the desire to learn more about the stories and people in scripture and the actions taken therein are in fact markers of a transformation in her life that she felt was noteworthy. Even Julia herself seemed surprised by what this light show sparked within her, for she reminded me – and herself – that she doesn’t consider herself a religious person and yet is now finding herself interested in stories with deep religious significance.

2.3 Impermanent Encounter at Mont-Saint-Michel

We arrive now at a new sound-and-light show and a new vantage point from which to observe it. I will attend to my own reflexive experience of the show at the abbey of Mont-Saint-Michel to speak of how these shows can clear the path toward encounters with God among spectators. Writing oneself into research through practices of reflexivity is a growing practice among qualitative researchers, one that Natalie Wigg-Stevenson exemplifies in her study of the production of theological knowledge at Nashville First Baptist Church.24 Thus, while much insight about sound-and-light shows is born through careful analysis of the shows as well as the generation of data about the experience of spectators, the personal nature of this enterprise offers an additional vantage point and a further layer of interpretation when I consider my own reflexive engagement.

The 2019 show at Mont-Saint-Michel, titled “Les Chroniques du Mont – L’Archange” (“Chronicles of the Mount – The Archangel”), offers stories about Saint Michael the Archangel and the famed site of pilgrimage in Northern France that bears his name. Rather than being projected on the outer walls of the building, this show invites visitors to walk through the abbey and view many different shows offered in its various chapels and halls. Visitors begin in a small chapel and make their way through halls, corridors, and chapels that immerse spectators into the story of Saint Michael. Some rooms use strips of light running up pillars that illuminate and change colour to timed sound effects as they interpret the history of Mont-Saint-Michel. Others use video projection and music to recount the legends surrounding Saint Michael’s roles within the stories of scripture and his appearance to Aubert, Bishop of Avranches, in dreams in which he asked the bishop to build a sanctuary to his name (which would become the abbey itself). One corridor uses ancient sound-and-light technology by employing candles and mirrors to illuminate the space as

the sounds of monks singing Gregorian chant fill the air. The show culminates as visitors walk up a dark staircase and suddenly find themselves in the abbey’s majestic church. Lights at the floor flood the columns, walls, and windows with soft colours that rotate along the colour spectrum. On the ceiling of the north semitranscept a projected show depicting Saint Michael’s battle with evil and hosts of angels who lead souls to be with God in heaven, thanks to the final conquest over evil that came through Jesus’ death and resurrection. Visitors are free to move about the church, listen to the sounds of an angelic choir, and walk onto the western porch to take in the abbey as it is lit against the dark sky.

The abbey of Mont-Saint-Michel has been a space of spiritual vitality for over one thousand years. It is a site of pilgrimage, a thin place at which, as Aubert has said, heaven comes down and touches earth. The sound-and-light show heightens the spiritual nature of this space, allowing it to come alive anew as it invites visitors on a journey closer and closer toward the beating heart of the cathedral, one that moves from the history of the stones and mortar to the Divine presence to which the space attests.

It is not surprising, then, that despite the fact that I attended this show as a researcher, my experience of it became deeply spiritual, one in which time stood still and transcendent holiness broke into the here and now. I entered the abbey as the sun was setting and was quickly struck by the serene mood evoked through the lights and sounds within the small chapel. I continued through sparse rooms and down corridors, mesmerized by how the spaces had been transformed to immerse us – in quite abstract ways – in the history of the abbey. When I arrived at the candle-lit room I became conscious of a shift within my spirit. As I moved deeper and deeper into the stone structure the light from the setting sun had gradually faded until the only light in the space was that which emanated from the candles, I noticed that my thoughts had shifted away from the research I was there to conduct and toward the temporality of that space and the presence of God that hovered around me. The ordinary elements of light, sound, and stone revealed “treasures of grace” through what Jean-Pierre de Caussade names “the sacrament of the present moment.”

The visible elements in that abbey had carved a path toward the invisible God.

As I walked down a small stone staircase I noticed that the projections in the next few rooms had shifted away from the history of the abbey and toward the biblical drama in which Saint Michael is held to be bound up. While there were discernible thematic shifts in these shows, the

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26 Jean-Pierre de Caussade, Abandonment to Divine Providence, Notre Dame (IN) 2010, 25f.
openness to the Divine that resulted from my experience in the candle-lit room also left me with a greater sensitivity to God’s presence, thus allowing me to better see the religious and spiritual elements of the projections thereafter. So when I finally ascended a narrow staircase and entered the abbey church my spiritual radar was on high alert. Immediately the soft lights running up the pillars in the nave and along the choir flooded me with an overwhelming awareness of the sacred. My eyes and my heart couldn’t help by be drawn to the simple cross that was illuminated behind the altar, flanked by radiating pillars with a candle between each one. There were certainly many other people in the church, some slowly walking around and others sitting in pews to take it all in; but all I noticed was the Divine spark that illuminated this ancient place. Through the sound-and-light show I had been converted from a visitor to a pilgrim and I had arrived at a destination that I did not know I had set out to reach. What began as a visit for the sake of research morphed into nothing less than an encounter with God, a spirit-to-Spirit connection, a living testimony that Mont-Saint-Michel truly is a site at which heaven descends to earth.

Of course, not everyone who experiences the sound-and-light show at Mont-Saint-Michel is moved toward an encounter with God. Some participants in my research, in fact, said that although there are overtly spiritual and religious aspects of the show, it did not connect with them in a spiritual or religious way. Others, however, offered responses that lead one to believe they sensed a Divine presence in the show, although they did not name it in such an explicit way. A visitor from Switzerland, for example, used the term “mystical” to describe his overall experience of the show, saying it connected with his “belief in something higher.” Another visitor told me that she “felt spiritual vibes,” a sensation that surprised her. Neither of these visitors came right out and said they encountered God in these shows, but they seemed to have connected with something beyond the self, with a transcendent power of which they were more acutely aware in that time and place. Their experiences join mine in speaking to the power of the show to evoke the presence of the Divine, thus fulfilling a present-day purpose for Mont-Saint-Michel as described by Fr. Fabien-Marie, prior of the religious community that oversees the abbey: “Welcoming tourists, and proposing they become pilgrims by witnessing with us.”27

3. Public Proclamation

These three case studies, each offering a particular angle of a specific sound-and-light show, demonstrate that, at some level, these shows can fulfill the three purposes of preaching. While they

27 Lucanmore (note 25), 1a.
are not sermons, they affirm that preaching “comes in a variety of forms and dynamics, in and out
of the pulpit.” Indeed they can testify to the story of God, engender transformation among
spectators, and even create spaces for encountering God.

The fact that these show can lead to the three ends of preaching does not mean that every
show plays a role in all – or even any – of these purposes. Much like preaching, there are a great
many variables at play that combine together to influence how spectators engage with these shows,
such as their openness to religion and spirituality, their personalities and preferences, the many
experiences they bring with them into that space, and even, as Julia reminds us, the behaviour of
people sharing in the experience. And, of course, God works in different ways with different
people, being revealed to some in one moment and others in another. As much as a particular
sound-and-light show might seem like potent fodder for one or more of the purposes of preaching,
there are no guarantees that spectators will witness God’s story, undergo even a minor
transformation, and sense the presence of God. Yet my interpretations of the content of the show
in Orléans, Julia’s experience in Jerusalem, and my reflexive engagement with the show at Mont-
Saint-Michel indicates that sound-and-light shows can indeed be a manifestation of homiletical
theology and a unique form of public proclamation in our contemporary world.

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28 William Brosend helpfully indicates that sermons are simply one way of proclaiming the gospel when he states that
although the Gospel writers say Jesus preached, he did not necessarily do so in what we might name as sermons.