

AUGUSTINE'S HOMILETIC METEOROLOGY

BY JOHN C. CAVADINI

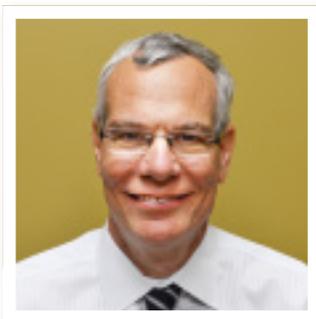
Editor's note: All citations from Augustine's Expositions of the Psalms are from Maria Boulding's New City Press translation.

Augustine was a fantastic preacher. How do we know that? We get a glimpse of his popularity as a preacher from some of the asides that he addresses to his congregation. At the end of his "exposition" or sermon on Psalm 38, which runs twenty-five pages in English translation and would probably have taken about an hour to preach, Augustine tells his congregation, somewhat bluntly, "Well, brothers and sisters, if I have burdened and wearied you, put up with it, for this sermon has been hard work for me too." Then he adds, "But in fact you have only yourselves to blame if you feel overworked, because if I felt you were getting bored with what was being said, I would stop immediately" (38.23, III/16, 193). We know that Augustine's church

often rocked with applause and cheers, and sometimes tears. Augustine's hearers looked forward eagerly to his preaching. At the beginning of a twenty-seven page sermon, he remarks, "Indeed, I see that you are all agog, eager to understand the mysteries of this prophecy. Anything I might say to focus your attention would be superfluous, since the Spirit of God has done that already" (Psalm 103(3).1, III/19, 139; see also 103 (2).1 where he acknowledges that the "violent demands" of the people "drag" the forthcoming homily from him, III/19, 130). There is even some evidence that Augustine's homilies had an interactive dimension (see the stylized question and answer that appears in some sermons, as I point out in "Simplifying Augustine" in *Educating People of Faith: Exploring the History of Jewish and Christian Communities*, 63-84). Clearly, Augustine's homilies were regarded as entertainment.



Joos van Gent,
Saint Augustine,
c. 1475



John C. Cavadini is the McGrath-Cavadini Director of the Institute for Church Life, Associate Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame, and a member of the International Theological Commission.

But if part of the reason that Augustine was such a well-received preacher is his superb mastery of the art of speaking, providing one of the most popular entertainments in Antiquity, it is not the only reason he succeeded. People enjoyed his preaching because they also felt that they learned something. They learned, for example, about the “mysteries of prophecy” as he put it in the passage above; that is, about the meaning of the Scriptures, all of which could be viewed as prophetic in some way. Augustine often remarks that he expects many of his listeners will already know some of what he has to say, because, as he puts it, they come so regularly to the “school for Scripture,” to church. People like his preaching because, listening to it, they were formed in a method of inquiry which took faith in God’s Word as the starting point and sought an understanding of what had been received in faith. Augustine taught his congregation that faith is itself an opening and an orientation to understanding. As such, faith is never transcended or left behind by understanding, but is rather the name of the orientation that begets understanding and is its *sine qua non*. Augustine himself was aware of his own position as a seeker, and he often styled himself in his sermons as one seeking understanding together with those to whom he was preaching. In the face of God’s Word, we are all students, and none of us “magister,” even if some of us are farther along in the ongoing quest.

But if preaching can itself be part of the ongoing quest for understanding, a moment in “seeking” and not just the delivery of “understanding” to others who are the seekers, then preaching is not in this understanding simply an art adjacent to or derivative from theology but properly speaking a moment in theology itself. There is no such thing as the relation between “theology” and “preaching,” because preaching is a moment in theology itself.

Augustine did not use the word “theology,” but used different expressions; for example, “*doctrina Christiana*,” meaning the act of teaching the Word of God, of “treating” or “investigating” the meaning of God’s Word, of “explaining” the Scriptures. Augustine’s work *De doctrina Christiana*, whose title is almost untranslatable, envisions the process of interpreting and explaining Scripture as having two phases, or “modes,” the first one a “research mode” of “discovering what is to be understood” (*modus inveniendi*), and the second a “mode of speaking forth that which has been understood” (*modus proferendi*). “What has been understood” does not exist as a “doctrina,” as teaching, apart from its being “spoken forth,” or proclaimed. It is that which is proclaimed that is “understood.” It is in this sense that Augustine will sometimes say that he learns by writing or by speaking. In any event, even that which is proclaimed is only provisionally understood, open to discussion and critique, so that the preacher does not ever depart from the ranks of the seekers, as already mentioned. I think we could fairly say that for Augustine, the Word of God is not fully interpreted or “treated” until it is proclaimed. (That is why Augustine’s sermons are sometimes called “Tractates” [meaning, “handlings” or “treatments”] or “Expositions” [*enarrationes*] of Scripture.

To understand more fully why this is true, we have to move into the world of imagery, which, one could say, is the basic medium in which the Fathers thought. They exegeted images even before concepts, and used different instances of the same image in Scripture to develop their arguments. In this case we must move into the realm of meteorology. Consider this interpretation of Psalm 76.20 (III/18, 87) *Your thunder echoes as though in a wheel*: “Whatever does this mean? How are we to understand it? May God help us!” Augustine begins. Note that the homily is rhetorically

styled as an inquiry on which everyone, preacher and people, are engaged. He continues:

When we were children and we heard a roll of thunder in the sky, we imagined that a cart was being driven out of a shed, for thunder causes vibrations similar to that made by vehicles. Are we to revert to that childish fancy when we read, *your thunder echoes as though in a wheel*, and understand it to mean that God keeps wagons up there in the clouds, and the clatter we hear is the noise their wheels make? Of course not; that would be puerile, silly and absurd...

... Even though that could well be what half the congregation is thinking. Augustine continues the inquiry. This is rhetorical styling in a way, because he has an answer, but it's not "merely rhetorical," as we might say today, failing to understand the power of rhetoric. The rhetorical styling turns Augustine into an inquirer along with his hearers; he may be the leader of the inquiry, but he is just as much a student in the school of the Word as are his hearers, and the search is undertaken together. The position of the "seeker" is privileged.

What does it mean then, *your thunder echoes as though in a wheel*? That your voice rolls along? But I don't understand that either. What are we to do? Let us question Idithun himself; perhaps he will explain what he meant by it. I do not understand, Idithun, so I will listen to what you have to say.

Idithun is the "leaper," the dedicatee of the Psalm. Augustine is suggesting that they read on farther to see if it clarifies the meaning:

Your lightening flashed all round the world. Go on: I still do not understand. The world is like a wheel because it lies all round us, so we rightly call it orbicular...or ring-shaped. So *your thunder echoes as though in a wheel, and your lightning flashes all round the world*. Those clouds we heard about rolled around the whole round world; they circled it, thundering and flashing their lightning, and caused turbulence in the deep. They thundered their teaching and coruscated with miracles, for their sound went forth throughout the world, their words to the ends of the earth.

Earlier, the Psalm had said, *Mighty was the waters' roar; the clouds sent forth their voice*. The thunder is the voice of these clouds, an image from Is. 5.6, where God says he will instruct the clouds not to rain on his vineyard. Since in Isaiah the vineyard is a figure for the people of Israel, the clouds must be figurative also, and must represent preachers of the Word of God. The thunder and lightening is the mighty preaching of these clouds unto the ends of the earth.

As unlikely as this may at first seem, this is Augustine's primary and consistent image for the preacher, a cloud. Psalm 88.7 asks, *Who among the clouds shall be reckoned equal to the Lord?* And Augustine comments:

Preachers can ask that question in all confidence, because no one among the clouds will be found the Lord's equal. ... [W]e understand these *clouds* to represent the preachers of the truth, brothers and sisters, just as the *heavens* do; they symbolize the prophets and apostles and all who proclaim the word of God" (88[1].7, III/18, 278).



Again, commenting on Ps. 96, verses 4-5, *His lightning flashed around the earth*, Augustine comments, “How did it flash? In such a way that the world might at last believe. Where does lightning come from? From clouds. But what are God’s clouds? The preachers of the truth” (III/18, 445). He goes on to explain:

**Giovanni Corente,
Saint John the Baptist
in a Landscape,
c. 1480**

When you see a cloud it looks like an obscure, dark shape in the sky, but something is hiding within it. If lightning strikes from the cloud there is a gleam of brightness; from something you despised has leapt something that terrifies you. Our Lord Jesus Christ sent his apostles, his preachers, like clouds. They seemed like ordinary men and they were despised, just as clouds are despised until something that amazes you leaps out from them. The apostles were initially seen as weak people, encumbered with flesh, then as ignorant, uneducated and common; but they bore within them something that could strike like lightning and glow fiercely. Peter stepped forward, a fisherman. He prayed, and a dead person sat up (Acts 9.40). Peter’s human shape was a cloud; the glory of his miracle was a flash of lightning (III/18, 445-46).

If, as a preacher, you don't quite feel up to raising the dead, Augustine hastens to add, "The same is true of both their words and deeds," and Augustine goes on to remind his hearers that in fact "The whole Church preaches Christ. *The heavens proclaim his justice* (v. 6)" because all the faithful who try to win for God those who have not yet believed, and who do this out of love, are heavens. All Christians participate in some way in the apostolic vocation of proclaiming the Word, even if that is by enlightening deed and not by words. You may not seem like much to yourself, after all, you are not the Apostle Peter—Augustine is saying, but, like him, you are a cloud; don't be fooled by the outward appearance, as a believer, you have within you an unsuspected depth of power to enlighten those around you and to make the *mountains*, that is the arrogant and prideful, melt away like wax.

What is that power? It is the power of truth, as Augustine has already pointed out; preachers proclaim the truth. But to put it that way is potentially to miss the power of what Augustine is saying. What is the truth? The truth of God's greatness, certainly, who has arranged the literal heavens, the literal mountains and clouds which the Psalms never tire of narrating unto the praise of the Creator. Augustine does not deny the literal sense of the texts or the greatness of the Creator that they are meant to hymn. But what does that greatness mean to me? To us? It can seem distant, abstract, as mysterious and terrifying as a clap of thunder. What access do we have to God's greatness, so that we can receive its true dimensions and respond in praise? We can look at Augustine's homiletic meteorology a little more closely to find out.

Commenting on Psalm 35:6, *Your mercy is in heaven, O Lord, and your truth reaches even to the clouds,*" Augustine says:

This means that the mercy you lavish on your holy ones is a heavenly, not an earthly, mercy; it is eternal, not bounded by time. But how did you proclaim it to the human race? By causing your truth to reach *even to the clouds*. Who could have had any idea of the heavenly mercy of god, unless God had announced it to human beings? How did he announce it? By sending his truth to the clouds. And what are these clouds? The preachers of God's word (35.8, III/16, 78).

It is God who is speaking through his preachers, and they are like the clouds, pouring down rain upon the earth, in the comparison, pouring down God's mercy, proclaiming the mercy of God, which is heavenly and eternal and infinite, upon the earth, upon anyone thirsting for it (which is everyone) (III/16, 77-78; note at *Expositions of the Psalms* 62.3, III/17, 236, preachers are those [clouds] filled with the water of the Holy Spirit in order to rain upon those who, in following the Way which is Christ, have come upon a desert). The power of the preacher is to proclaim the greatness of God according to God's word, which is essentially a record of God's mercy. One can hear the *Confessions* in the background here. In the prologue, Augustine first asks God a metaphysical rhetorical question, "What are you?" meant to indicate God's unique greatness; but he quickly turns to another question, as you will recall, namely, "What are you to me?" and it is only by answering that question that God's greatness can be properly realized. Only by confessing God's compassion and mercy can one recognize for oneself the greatness of God. Only by proclaiming God's mercy will preachers be able to communicate a sense of the true greatness of God and engender the praise of God in their listeners (and not, Augustine warns time and again praise of oneself, as though it were one's own mercy one was "raining").

The image of the preacher as a cloud “raining” God’s mercy, thundering God’s threats (which, paradoxically, are also a function of God’s mercy) and lightening with astonishing deeds of God’s powerful love – this image corresponds to Augustine’s characteristic image for Scripture itself, namely, the sky. This image is familiar to any reader of the *Confessions* who has persisted to Book 13 (13.15.16). But the image comes from Psalm 103.2, which says, *He stretched out the sky like a skin* (or tent, or parchment, that is, anything made from *skin*). In his first sermon on Psalm 103, Augustine comments that literally this is written to indicate the greatness of God: “You have looked at this vast construction [the sky],” he tells his hearers:

and you reflect on how hard it is for a human being to put up even a small vault or arch [except at Notre Dame], how much effort and trouble he hast to put in, and how long the job takes. The limitations of our minds might therefore have suggested to us that similar strenuous labor was entailed in the works of God; and to rule out such a misunderstanding the psalmist used a symbol of effortless operation which you can grasp (103[1].7, III/19, 114).

But figuratively, since “skin” represents mortality (since the animal whose skin is “stretched out” into a tent or parchment is necessarily dead, and also from the “tunics of skin” with which God clothed Adam and Eve after they sinned, often interpreted symbolically as mortality), the sky is the fabric of preaching which, after the death of the mortal preachers, was preserved as Scripture, stretched out over us as an authority. As Augustine notes, drawing upon 1 Cor. 1.21,

Those who believed were to be saved through the foolishness preaching of, and so God chose mortal creatures, human beings subject to death

and destined to die. He employed a mortal tongue and uttered mortal sounds, he employed the ministry of mortal men and made use of mortal instruments, and by this means a sky was made for you, so that in this mortal artifact you might come to know the immortal Word, and by participating in this Word you too might become immortal (103[1].8, III/19, 115).

Behind the sky in Antiquity was believed to be a vast storehouse of water, the “deep,” and in Augustine’s Scriptural meteorology, the waters above Scripture are the heights and depths of God’s love:

The commandment of charity is higher than the skies and higher than all books, for the books are subordinate to it and the tongues of all the saints fight in its service, as does every movement, spiritual or physical, on the part of God’s stewards. Charity is the supereminent way, and we can rightly say that God covers the higher regions of the sky with waters because you will find nothing loftier than charity in the sacred books. (103[1].9, III/19, 118)

Also, the Spirit is imaged as living waters in Jn. 7, and it is the Holy Spirit who pours out the charity of God into our hearts (Rom. 5.5). The waters of God’s love, the Holy Spirit, are what are “above” the sky of Scripture. The next verse of the Psalm, *he makes the clouds his chariot*, indicates that preachers, who send down onto the people the rain of God’s love, make it possible for them to ride up or ascend to an understanding of the Scriptures. And we know from the *De doctrina* that Scripture teaches nothing but charity or love. The preachers enable the vineyard of the Lord, the church, to bear the fruits of charity by engendering in them an understanding of the Scriptures, which teach only charity, that is, love of God and neighbor.

By this time the astute listener will have noticed that it isn't only the "clouds" in the "sky," that represent preaching, but the "sky" itself. This whole celestial arrangement is an apparatus of preaching. God's revelation is mediated through human preachers, whose deaths "stretch out" like a skin their preaching over all the earth. The reason that the Word of Scripture is not fully interpreted until it is proclaimed is that it is itself preaching. It is essentially proclamation, and the whole delivery system, if it can be put that way, is as organic an arrangement as the rain that comes down from the clouds in the sky. The inspiration of Scripture is God's inspiration of the apostolic preaching (see 103[1].8, III/19, 116), the proclamation of the love of God, and Scripture is not fully interpreted until that proclamatory intent is realized. One could say that Scripture "intends" or is intended to be preached, and it is only in preaching that its meaning is fully revealed.

Nowadays we tend to regard preaching as something almost adventitious to exegesis. Preachers can use the results of the academic exegetes, who seem to have pride of place when it comes to "really" understanding the Scriptures, with all the prestige that goes with it. Preachers must feel lucky to receive not rain but the dribblings from the enterprise of exegesis. If they are clouds, they are the ones who obscure the true, unbiased understanding of the text. Nothing could be more foreign to Augustine's understanding of the relation between preaching and exegesis.

However, it is also important to note that we latter day clouds do not fulfill the task of interpreting Scripture properly without appropriate study and research. Even if we have been concentrating on the "*modus proferendi*," we can't leave behind the "*modus inveniendi*." Augustine spends the prologue of the *De doctrina* telling us what he thinks of people who imagine they can preach without study, who

imagine that they can understand Scripture through the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, without bothering with an education. He comments, in his special Augustinian brand of sarcasm:

For those who rejoice in having received a divine gift, and are proud of understanding and commenting on the holy books without the aid of such rules [for interpretation] as I have undertaken to pass on here, and who therefore reckon that what I have wished to write is quite superfluous [always a bad idea when dealing with Augustine]; this is how their objection is to be met: they should recollect that, though they are quite right to rejoice in a splendid gift from God, it was still from human beings that they learned, at the very least, how to read and write (*De doctrina*, Preface 3).

True, the monk Anthony did not know how to read and write, but even he had to learn Scripture from hearing it read. And even Anthony had to learn language just like everyone else does. Scripture is a "skin," it is inspired but it is a kind of mortal remains, an artifact as culturally bound as any human artifact is, even if it does contain all the waters of God's truth. It is a mark of pride, Augustine says, not to want to learn from other people, that is, those who have mastered the liberal arts that enable them to understand things like linguistic convention, the kind of thing that hyssop is, and the kind of thing the literal sky is, and who have been able to press these skills into service in the understanding of Scripture. Scripture itself is part of an economy of revelation mediated through human beings. Augustine drily remarks that Moses actually did speak to God "face to face," but he still accepted advice from his father-in-law on how to govern such a great people, and his father-in-law was even a foreigner. And the apostle Philip did not send the eunuch in Acts 8 to an angel



Gian Lorenzo Bernini,
Detail of Saint Augustine,
St. Peter's Throne,
St. Peter's Basilica, 1657-66

for an explanation of the book of Isaiah, but helped him himself. Paul was struck down by a divine voice from heaven, but the voice did not explain the Christian faith to him directly (as it could have) but sent him to a human being to receive the sacraments from him and to join the Church. And the centurion Cornelius, though an angel told him his prayers had been heard, was nevertheless sent to Peter for instruction and baptism.

How, after all,” Augustine asks, “could the saying be true, *For the temple of God, which is what you are, is holy* (1 Cor. 3.17), if God never gave any answers from his human temple, but only thundered out his revelation from the [literal] sky and by means of angels? Then again, charity itself, which binds people together with the knowledge of unity, would have no scope for pouring minds and hearts in together, as it were, and blending them with one another, if human beings were never to learn anything from each other.

Those preachers who claim to understand Scripture by direct inspiration of God, with no help from other human beings, misunderstand the character of revelation. They regard the mediation of human agency and will as accidental, though the incoherence of their position is demonstrated when Augustine wonders rhetorically why they bother to preach at all, instead of simply referring their would-be hearers to the direct inspiration of God. But the mediated character of revelation is not optional; it is part of God’s intention. We get a hint here as to why, namely, that teaching and learning the things of God from each other builds up the community of charity or love, for in such a situation we owe not only God, but each other, a debt of gratitude for the reception of, and the passing on of, the most beautiful things there are in life, namely, faith, hope and love.

But in order to discover more fully why God has willed that revelation be mediated through human agency, we have to go back to the weather station and examine the clouds one more time. Or rather, one very special cloud. In his first exposition of Psalm 88, at verse 7, *Who among the clouds shall be reckoned equal to the Lord?* Augustine explains that the Son of God, Jesus Christ, is a cloud unique among the clouds. He remarks:

We are called *clouds* on account of our flesh, and because as clouds we shower down rain we are known as preachers of the truth; but our flesh and his flesh arise differently. We are called children of God, but he is Son of God in a different sense. The cloud of his flesh came from a virgin, and he is Son from eternity, equal to the Father (88[1].7, III/18, 279).

Citing Matthew 16.13-16, Augustine poses and elaborates Jesus’s question rhetorically for his listeners:

Who do people say that I am, I, the Son of Man? Tell me. I am seen, I am closely observed, I walk about among you, and perhaps I am deemed unimportant because you are so used to me. Tell me, then, *Who do people say that I am, I, the Son of Man?* They see a son of man, and therefore they see a cloud. Let them tell me, or rather, you tell me, *who people say I am* (Ibid).

Though as God the Word, he stretches mightily from end to end and touches everything by his purity and wisdom (103[1].8, III/19, 115), “he came in flesh to a world from which he had never been absent in his divinity,” because the world in its “wisdom” had not been able to recognize him. The ultimate referent of the symbol “cloud,” in other words, is the foolishness of God in the Incarnation. The Incarnate Word is the Word in a “cloud” of flesh, fully hidden in that cloud, and yet fully revealed by it. How hidden was he as a cloud? Augustine points out in another homily that he was himself the source of Light, the Sun, and yet he had hidden the light within him so thoroughly, that is, he had thrown in his lot with ours so completely, that he needed a lamp to point him out. John the Baptist saying, *Behold, the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world*, is like an oil lamp illuminating the Sun (Tractate 2 on the Gospel of John). The one who is the source of truth was dependent, in other words, on human testimony to reveal who he was. The vulnerability of the Word made flesh could not be put more poignantly, because we all know, in the end, how reliable human testimony can be. It can just as easily betray you as proclaim you, even more easily betray.

But for Augustine it is in the “foolishness” of that cloud that all the wisdom of God is contained and revealed. It is precisely in his hiddenness, in his willingness to become fully what we are and live under the conditions of fallen life as we do (though without sin), that all of the Love and Mercy of God is revealed. In his lifetime, the Lord preached through the “cloud of his flesh” (28.3, III/15, 294), and this does not mean simply what he said in words, but by his whole person, by the whole economy of the Incarnation. The Word made flesh is the supreme instance of preaching, and it is *because* God is hidden in the cloud of flesh that the preaching is effective, or

better, that there is any revelation at all. God could have thundered directly from the literal clouds. We might have been terrified and acquired some notion of God’s greatness that way, but we would never suspect the essence or the truth of God’s greatness, that God is Love. It is the kenosis, the self-emptying, of the Incarnation that reveals God’s true greatness. The subsequent economy of preaching is only a continuation of the original Incarnational economy. It is itself an embodiment of God’s mercy and love. That the proclamation of the love of God in Christ is entrusted to human beings is simply a continuation of the love and mercy revealed in the Incarnation, a continuation of the kenosis of the Incarnation. That Scripture exists as an authentic product of regular old fallen human culture but is nevertheless just as much a living Word as it is an artifact of the mortal past, is itself an indication of the extent and beauty of God’s mercy and love. It is as high as the sky, and dwarfs any conception of mercy and love we might dream up on our own. And it is as seemingly unreachable as the sky. And yet no, God has put the Scripture and its interpretation into the hands of other human beings, the preachers who like clouds rain down from the sky of God’s love a rain of his mercy. Sometimes this mercy is received as a call to repentance, and then it is like thunder. Sometimes this mercy is received as mighty deeds of love, raising the dead either physically or spiritually. But it is always received as rain in the desert, as mercy where there had seemed none, as love where there had seemed only a wasteland of petty interests and the ceaseless quest for prestige (see *Conf.* 1).

But the fact that this is true is itself the work of God's mercy. The fact that the preacher is a "cloud" means that the preacher's human being is a locus of God's self-emptying, a continuation of the Incarnation in the members of a Body of which Christ is the Head. The reason that preaching is a moment in the exegesis of Scripture, rather than an add-on or an afterthought, is that it carries forward the economy of the self-emptying of the Word, which gives rise to Scripture in the first place. And so preaching continues the embodiment of the Word. That the Word of God is not thundered to us from the literal sky, but mediated to us through the spiritual, zealous, and loving words of the preacher, is itself a continuation of the economy of God's love; building up the Church in unity, building up the Body, the whole Christ, as members of so glorious a Head. For Augustine, a true interpretation of Scripture is effected not in the first place by disinterested readers of the text, but by preachers who proclaim the love and mercy of God that Scripture itself proclaims, and who, in so doing, thereby build up not themselves, but the Church.

