

Preach the Word

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Delivery Matters

By Nathan Nass

I can still remember my first real “preaching” opportunity—evening chapel at MLC during my senior year. I triumphantly finished writing my manuscript. It felt so good to be done! I even told my dad that I had my chapel ready. Do you know what he asked? “So have you memorized it?”

Huh. Memorizing that devotion hadn’t crossed my mind for even a second. In fact, I remember being a little flustered. “Memorize it? What do you mean? I’ve got it all written out!” I hadn’t given the slightest thought about how to deliver my message. I had finished writing. I was ready! I wonder if that’s why attendance at evening chapel was often light at MLC. Delivery matters!

I’ve seen that in a powerful way during the coronavirus pandemic. I bet you have too. I’ve gotten to watch myself preach more in the past two months than I had in all the rest of my ministry combined. Have you liked that? For me, it’s been eye-opening. My kids can ask me right on the couch, “Is it over yet?” I can see how my sermons seem to drag on. And all the little things...

Why am I waving my one arm all the time?

Why am I grinning with only half my face?

Why am I not smiling as I say those words?

Why am I talking so fast?

Why am I talking so slow?

Why am I looking up at the ceiling?

For me, it’s been painful to watch. It’s made me think, “How do people put up with this?” It’s not just what you say that’s important, it’s how you say it. Delivery matters!

That’s a very biblical idea. In his Word, our God doesn’t just focus on the what. He also focuses a lot of attention on how his Word is shared. Remember how God delivered his Law to his people on Mt. Sinai? He didn’t just rattle off ten commands. Listen:

¹⁶ On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, ¹⁹ and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him. (Ex 19:16-19)

Thunder and lightning and smoke... The delivery mattered!

But remember how Jesus delivered God’s Word to the woman caught in adultery? The Pharisees wanted fire and smoke! All they got was a finger drawing on the ground and a gentle voice:

Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹ “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.” (Jn 8:6-11)

The delivery mattered! It wasn't just what Jesus said. It was how he said it.

Think of John the Baptist. The Gospels go into detail to describe his delivery of God's message:

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea ² and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." ... ⁴ John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. (Mt 3:1-2,4)

What a sight—and delivery! Now compare that with the apostle John in his epistles: "My dear children" (1 Jn 2:1), "Dear friends" (1 Jn 2:7), "Dear children" (1 Jn 2:12). Not quite the same delivery, huh? For each, the way they delivered God's message mattered. In God's inspired Word, it's amazing to see how God chose lots of different ways for his Word to be delivered.

So, delivery matters. As I say that, here's one caution: I'm not trying to tell you exactly how you should preach. I don't know you. I don't know your people. I'm also not telling you to preach like me. In fact, please don't preach like me. Don't preach like your neighboring pastor either. Please preach with the gifts God's given you. Here's what I am saying: As you preach, don't just think about *what* you say. Think about *how* you say it. How you deliver God's Word matters.

Let's start with this: Every sermon has a form or structure. Long before you deliver your sermon, you decide what pattern it will follow. So here's my question: Does each of your sermons follow



the same pattern? Does each message follow the same template? Maybe you start with a story, dive into the text, share law, share gospel, then end with an illustration. Maybe you start with an introduction, state your theme and parts, explain part one (usually law), explain part two (usually gospel), and end by restating your theme and parts. That's your template. It's basically the same week to week. Your hearers expect it. In fact, it's predictable. They know what's coming next.

God's Word isn't predictable.

Here's the problem: God's Word isn't predictable. Not every text has the same form. In fact, biblical texts have very different forms and structures. How often do you find yourself jumping around in the text? Sharing the message in a very different order than how it's laid out in Scripture? Could it be we're determined to make God's Word fit our neat templates? It doesn't.

God sent Nathan to preach his Word to David. So Nathan told a story—a parable—that initially seemed to have nothing to do with the sin in David's life (2 Sam 12). God enabled Stephen to preach his Word to the Sanhedrin. Stephen retold the history of God's people, from Abraham to Moses to Joshua (Ac 7). God sent Paul to preach his Word to the Athenians. Paul didn't tell stories. He pointed to the natural knowledge of God (Ac 17). Three very different forms. Three different sermons. Three powerful calls to repentance (2 Sam 12:7; Ac 7:52; Ac 17:30).

If divinely inspired texts come in different forms, shouldn't our sermons come in a variety of forms and formats too? In some texts, there is clear law followed by clear gospel with a very clear division between the two. In other texts, the author carefully weaves back and forth from law to gospel to law to gospel. In some texts, a story dominates, with a short, powerful summary at the end. In other texts, Christian doctrine is expounded point by point. Our wise God chose to share his Word in an incredible variety of ways. There's nothing predictable about God's Word!

Does the form of your sermons reflect that? I was blessed by a WLS summer quarter class called "Imitating Scriptural Variety in Sermonic Form and Structure." Professor Rich Gurgel opened our eyes to the different genres of Scripture. There's historical narrative, poetry, wisdom literature, prophecy, parables, epistles, apocalyptic... Far from following one template, wouldn't it make sense that sermons written on different genres of Scripture will sound different?

Think of it like this: Each genre of Scripture is a little like a different musical instrument. There are low and somber texts. There are bright and joyful texts. There are deep and profound texts. There are light and repetitive texts. Let the genre of Scripture guide not just the words, but also the form of your sermon. Are you preaching on a story? Tell the story! Are you preaching on a deep doctrine from the epistles? Explain it point by point. Are

you preaching on a psalm? Speak beautifully with metaphors and similes. What form is suggested by the text? What instrument?

My first sermon after taking that class was on 1 Corinthians 10: "Be careful that you don't fall!" There's gospel in that text—"God is faithful!"—but the somber warnings from Israel's history sound like the low tones of a trombone. I told my people, "This isn't a joyful section of God's Word. Today's sermon is going to sound like a somber trombone. But it's what we need!" On another occasion, I preached on Jeremiah 31:31-34. What beautiful words! I told my associate that I was struggling to find more law to bring into the sermon. He said, "Why? This is gospel! Preach the gospel!" Forcing God's text into my template isn't biblical preaching. Preach the text!

I encourage you to think about the form of your sermons. Predictable sermons tempt our hearers to tune out. May our sermons reflect the richness and variety of God's inspired Word! Whatever form your sermon takes, don't give it all away at the start. Nathan didn't walk in and say to David, "Today I'm going to tell you how guilty you are..." Not at all! He started with a story. Peter didn't stand up on Pentecost and start with: "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." No, that's how he finished! Don't give it all away at the start. Help me see my sin as if there were no Savior. Then amaze me with God's unexpected grace in Jesus.

But even after you've thoughtfully decided on the form of your sermon, even after it's been carefully written, remember you're still not done. Delivery matters! I know you're a busy pastor. I know that practicing a sermon feels like an extra burden after you've spent so much time preparing it. But a sermon read off the page isn't the same as a sermon preached to the eyes. Beautiful words written on a page benefit no one when our wandering minds forget them.

A sermon read off the page isn't the same as a sermon preached to the eyes.

So **memorization is key**. After my debacle as an MLC senior, I'm grateful that my homiletics professor at the Seminary insisted we preach our first sermons without a manuscript. I bet I spent at least 10 hours memorizing that first sermon, but it was worth it! Thankfully, memorization has gotten quicker with practice. People appreciate it when their pastor looks them in the eyes. The time you spend memorizing your manuscript or rehearsing your outline is well worth it.

Here's an added encouragement: Don't just memorize your words. **Memorize God's words too**. At first, I would look down and read the Bible passages in my sermons. One day, a man asked me, "How come you memorize your words, but you don't bother to memorize God's words?" He had a point! Since that day, I've memorized God's words too. It's been a blessing to have more Bible passages memorized, and it's a joy to look people in the eyes when I share God's Word.



But as you look them in the eye, **what's the expression on your face?** Do you know? My 5-year-old son is at the age when he loves to have his parents watch him do everything. Recently, he climbed up the slide all by himself. When he made it to the top, he proudly turned to me and said, "Did you see that?" I said, "Yes, I saw you!" He said, "How come you don't have a happy face? Make your happy face!" People notice what's on your face. Does it match your message?

"How come you don't have a happy face?"

I know a kind pastor who preached very Christ-centered sermons. Do you know what his wife often told him? "You look angry when you preach." He did! Do you? He had to keep one thing on his mind: Smile! Is that you? Maybe the opposite's true. A brother took notes on a sermon I preached at a pastor's conference. One of his comments was, "Why do you smile when you preach the law?" Huh. I didn't know that. Does your face match your message? People notice!

But it's not just your face. **Preaching involves your whole body**. Are you communicating distance or intimacy? Excitement or boredom? Urgency or monotony? All I ask is that you think about it. Are you going to stand or sit? Pulpit or not? These are important decisions! We can't be dogmatic about this. Jesus preached reclining at a table (Mt 26:20), sitting in a synagogue (Lk 4:20), sitting on a mountain (Mt 5:1), and from a boat (Lk 5:3). Why do you do what you do? Have you thought it through? Is your body communicating what you want to communicate?

There are so many elements of delivery. Do you ask **rhetorical questions** in your sermons? If not, try it. Asking questions draws people in. When you ask a rhetorical question, however, make sure you pause. **Give time for people to ponder**. I know it's awkward, but it's okay for there to be empty space in your sermons.



Paul preaching in Athens

Often, nothing recaptures people's attention more than a well-timed pause. If people were daydreaming, they will wonder what they missed!

All of this emphasizes the need to **practice before we preach**. When you know your sermon well, you can to **control the speed** at which you preach. Slow down to draw people's attention to an important phrase. At other times, purposefully speak quickly and build to a climax. Think of Romans 8:38-39. "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers..." Paul builds and builds and builds!

But "if you cannot speak like angels, if you cannot preach like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus; you can say he died for all." In everything, **exude Christ's love and concern** for your people. They notice! They want you to preach like you as you tell them about the love of Jesus.

This means that **all WELS pastors aren't going to preach the same way**. That's okay! The *how* is going to be different, because we're each in different settings. I have the unique opportunity to preach to two large services of 100+ people in English, one small service of 10-15 people in Spanish, and another service of 20 people

in English. That's three totally different settings. The message is the same, but it can't be delivered in the same way. Different settings call for a different delivery, because delivery matters!

Our God has shared his Word in so many ways: thunder and lightning, a burning bush, a gentle whisper, a Man who had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him. God's focused a lot of attention on *how* his Word is shared. We can too. So even when the pandemic ends, don't stop watching yourself preach. Keep growing in *how* you share God's message.

I'm thankful for the opportunity to write for *Preach the Word* over this past year. I pray these articles have encouraged you to preach simply. As Luther said,

Cursed be every preacher who aims at lofty topics in the church, looking for his own glory and selfishly desiring to please one individual or another. When I preach here I adapt myself to the circumstances of the common people. I don't look at the doctors and masters, of whom scarcely forty are present, but at the hundred or the thousand young people and children. It's to them that I preach, to them that I devote myself, for they, too, need to understand.¹

Simple preaching is Lutheran preaching!

In my research, I came across an interesting comment about Luther. One blogger wrote, "Many think of Martin Luther primarily as a reformer. However, he thought of himself first and foremost, as a preacher."² It is a blessing to preach the Word of God, isn't it? By God's grace, you are a preacher, like Luther was, and I am too. Love it. Practice it. Grow in it!

Your identity isn't tied to any sermon. It's tied to Jesus.

But that quote isn't right. Luther wasn't first and foremost a preacher. You aren't either. Luther was a redeemed child of God bought with Jesus' blood. That's who you are too! Your identity isn't tied to any sermon. It's tied to Jesus. Whether people listen or fail to listen, Jesus is your comfort, and Jesus is your strength. You are a forgiven child of God who can't keep the grace of God to yourself, who can't hold the love of Jesus inside. That's who you are! It's that simple. Don't make it complicated. Show people Jesus! May Jesus bless you as you do.

Nathan

¹ LW 54:235-236

² Ingino, Steven. "Six Lessons from Luther's preaching." <https://thecripplegate.com/six-lessons-from-luthers-preaching/>