

Preaching with Outsiders in Mind *Insights from an Urban Setting*

By Joel Russow

Editor's note: This issue continues our series on preaching with those outside our church membership in mind. The previous issue provided insights from a pastor serving in rural Nebraska. This issue provides insights from a pastor serving in the greater Seattle area.

Pastor Daniel Lange shares insights from his ministry at Light of Life Lutheran in Covington, WA, where he has served for twelve years. Pastor Lange also serves as the first vice president of the Pacific Northwest District.

Ideas from Pastor Daniel Lange

Four examples or thoughts on how outsiders have impacted your preaching preparation:

Preschool parents - Every week I see the moms and dads dropping their kids off at our preschool. They are outsiders who could visit church any given Sunday and sometimes do. In my conversations with them, I'm often reminded that they are busy, stressed, worried for their children, filled with questions or guilt about parenting, and looking for deeper peace and purpose in life than living the "American dream" in the suburbs of Seattle. (I confess as a parent living in the same community that I struggle with much of the same). What would I want to say if a family from our preschool stepped in this week? "God use these words for them. May they find the Savior who invites them to find rest for their weary souls."

My neighbors - Last year, two young professionals moved in next door. As we greeted one another, the conversation died when

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I said I was a pastor. Since then, as I've poked around different topics, I would describe their worldview as many living on West Coast—atheist, humanist, and secularist, with a splash of anti-religion. They care deeply about social issues. While they haven't come to church yet, my prayer and goal for them is that someday they will. When I see opportunities to touch on current events in my sermon, I ask myself, "How would I say it if I knew they were coming? Or how might I say it if we were talking to one another in the backyard?" When looking at issues in the world, we may not agree on the cause, but we can agree that the symptoms are ugly. I, too, see the devastating effects sin has on our society. How can I connect those problems to the problem and finally to the Solution of Jesus?

The drug-addicted welder - I met a man in my community two years ago. He was more open with me than anybody I've ever met. After finding out I was a pastor, in the first five minutes he confessed to me he was addicted to drugs, alcohol, pornography, and sometimes slept with prostitutes. He said he had recently been trying to quit it all. With tears starting to run down his cheeks, he wondered if I had time for a question. He wanted to know if his baptism still meant anything. I was able to talk him into a Bible Information Class but still have not convinced him to come to church, although he has promised many times to show up. He is a reason I sometimes ask myself, "Is God's grace clear in this message? If this is the Sunday he arrives, will he see the Jesus who forgives him still, loves him still, and, yes, whose baptism still promises eternal life?"

The drifting de-churched - The collapse of Mars Hill in Seattle left 10,000 Christians without a church home. A few of these families have made their way to our congregation, joining some others with a non-denominational background. Many of them are burned out by heavy preaching which presents Christ only as example.

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They remind me to preach the law with all its deadly force and the gospel with all its life-giving power.

Three encouragements to preachers for keeping outsiders in mind in sermon preparation:

1. Regularly pray for first time visitors at your church. I live in an area where we don't get walk-in visitors on a regular basis. When we do, one thought I don't want to have is, "I wish I would have put more time into my sermon this week." I've heard this from several others: the best outreach a pastor can do is to have a good sermon every week. Praying for regular visitors is an exciting pastoral practice. It's exciting because God often says, "Yes," to those prayers. It also helps me keep the outsider in mind when preparing the sermon.
2. Trust your sermon preparation process. Sometimes when Easter, Christmas, or VBS Sunday is coming, I find myself falling into the trap of focusing on the audience before I have spent enough time in the Word. At some point, we do turn from gazing into the Word to gazing at our audience, but don't make that turn too quickly. Stay glued to the text, soaked in the Word, and keep digging, just like any other week. When the speaker is captivated by what he has discovered, the audience (both insiders and outsiders) will be listening.
3. We have THE STORY. In the age of information, where people are bombarded with disinformation, fake news, biased views, and thousands of stories every week, what comfort to know that we have THE STORY. Even though we may not know the



Reaching out to neighbors

personal story of every outsider who comes into our doors, we know that God's STORY includes them. What a privilege to share, even if it's just one time.

Two sermon excerpts of preaching with outsiders in mind:

Here is an excerpt from Pastor Lange's sermon on Genesis 1, preached during the summer of 2020 when protests and riots gripped Seattle, Portland, and much of the nation. Lange comments that the sermon attempted to connect social issues people are passionate about to the greater problem of sin.

"Why is our world broken?" Be careful as you answer that question. Some might say, "Because of racism." I wouldn't disagree. Some might say "Because of lawlessness." I wouldn't disagree. "Because of selfishness, because of hatred, because of greed." I wouldn't disagree. But the reason I urged you to be careful in answering the question, "What is wrong with our world?" is this: everything we see happening right now is connected to a problem that runs much deeper than anything you see in the headlines. Like a river of pollution and filth THE PROBLEM runs its ugly course through every part of our existence. Its source, the headwaters, begin flowing into our world just 2 chapters later.

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Genesis 3. The tragic account of how God's beautiful creation fell apart. Tempted by the devil at a tree, the first human beings reached for something they could never attain, they believed the serpent's lie that they could become like God himself. And rebellion, evil, and sin went viral. Spreading like a cancer into all of God's creation. Racism is an evil that flows from this event. Lawlessness is an evil that flows from this event. Injustice, violence, hatred, fear, greed, selfishness, apathy—all of it flows from what took place at that tree.

It's very likely that because of your background and upbringing, one of these issues angers you more than another. And because of that, you are likely drawn to one side more than another. And if you are drawn to a side, you then have the target: the other side. To point out how they are so wrong and how your side is so right. And like blinders on a racehorse, our anger focuses our attention on the issue and against the other side and we forget something. We often can't see it, but since the fall into sin there is not a single person living on earth who is completely right. Not even close to it. "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). I'm not saying there isn't a time to speak up and speak out and stand for justice and righteousness, but I fear we often do so without acknowledging and confessing something first—that wicked and evil river of pollution flowing from the tree in the Garden of Eden has

flowed right into my own heart as well. As children of Adam and Eve, we were born with hearts of darkness. You were born with a heart of emptiness. We all enter this world with hearts filled with chaos, emptiness, and disorder. We are all guilty and deserve God's righteous and true anger to come down upon us.

The scene is set again for one of the greatest demonstrations of God's power and love. He looks at this mess of a world and he sends his Word again to bring peace, order, justice, and life. This time he didn't just speak the Word, he sent the Word. The Word of God took on human flesh. Born of a woman and placed in a manger. The Word grew up and walked the earth. He, and only he, lived righteously and walked perfectly. He, and only he, was always in the right. He, and only he, was truly in a position to look down on everyone else in righteous anger, but he didn't. Instead, he looked up to his Father and said, "Let it be me! Let your anger come down upon me! Not them. Let all this mess fall squarely upon my shoulders." And so, we go to another tree. The tree where the innocent Son of God, took up all our pain and misery and suffered injustice for us once and for all.

Many guests would be used to preaching heavy on sanctification and light on justification.

Here is an excerpt from Pastor Lange's Palm Sunday sermon on Philippians 2. This sermon was preached on a Sunday when many preschool guests would be in attendance. Lange comments that this sermon attempted to speak to the de-churched with a non-denominational background. Many guests would be used to preaching heavy on sanctification and light on justification.

Remember what was said at the beginning (of the text), "In your relationships with each other have the same mindset Jesus displayed." God commands us to be humble just like Jesus. And if I said, "Amen," right now and you left, you might be thinking this was the sermon summary: "1) Jesus was humble, 2) God commands us to be humble just like Jesus," and you might be fine...for a while. You might go to IHOP and get your pancakes, go to Home Depot and buy your hanging flowerpots for the deck, but sooner or later this question would catch up with you today or this week, "Have I been humble like Jesus? Am I in my life being humble like Jesus? Can I ever be humble like Jesus?"

Why is it that my heart enjoys having the advantage over others? When people treated Jesus like nothing, he carried on in love without complaining? But why is it that when people dismiss me or treat me like nothing, I want to say, "Excuse me, don't you know who I am? How significant I am? You



can't treat me like that!" And being a servant? Why is it that after a long day of work, the dishes get done, the house gets picked up, and finally a quiet hour for me, and right when we sit down, we hear from upstairs, "Mom, Dad, I need you." Why is this heart of ours is so slow to serve? This is not a "Look at Jesus and be humble like him!" kind of sermon, this a "Look and first be *humbled!*" kind of sermon. Be humbled by the truth we haven't loved this way. Be humbled that God commands us to love this way, but we can't. We have broken his commands. Someone had to pay for our pride and our selfishness, someone had to pay for the times we haven't loved others. Someone had to pay for all of our sins. That is what Jesus came to do. It was the reason he came to the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. To rescue us from sin. He didn't bring an army. He would win victory over sin by surrendering himself. His humility is our hope!

There is no greater act of humble love. The exalted one, who by nature is God, allowed sinful humans to pin him to a cross-beam with nails. The most powerful being to ever walk the earth rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and offered himself to die. The one equal to God didn't consider using that advantage for himself, even when the other crucified criminals mocked him telling him he should save himself. He stayed. He didn't even think of saving himself, because all that was on his mind was saving you. The payment we owed God the Humble Servant has given.

One preaching resource (besides the Bible and Confessions) in your library and why you have found it valuable:

One resource is my blank sermon writing template page. Every week I open this document when it is time to begin a new sermon. It has prayers, reminders, tidbits from homiletics class, quotes from other preachers, sermon diagnostic questions, etc. Here is a sampling of what is on it right now:

1. Begin with prayer. Remember: It is a privilege to stand in pulpit. Enjoy the process!

2. Catch ME in the Gospel net this week!
3. Holy Spirit, use this message despite me!
 - Text: Theme of Day: Prayer of Day: Lessons: Initial Ideas:
 - Law: “How can I preach the Law to the secure sinner?” (CFW Walther, *Proper Distinction*)
 - Gospel: “How can I preach the Gospel to the crushed sinner?” (Walther)
 - Other thoughts and questions:
 - Where is Christ in this text?
 - What lie is the devil telling? How does this portion of God’s Word expose that lie?
 - OT questions: What does the text reveal about God and his will, God’s acts, covenants, law, grace, etc?
 - What is the narrow and broad context of this text?
 - Don’t forget the “So What?” factor.
 - With this sermon I pray that the Holy Spirit will _____ my listeners to...

Timeless Reminders

Editor’s note: This issue’s timeless reminder comes from sainted Prof. Daniel Deuschlander’s article, “Preaching Old Testament Texts.” You can read Prof. Deuschlander’s article its entirety in Preach the Word 7:2.

Perhaps it will help if we start with the simple and so useful assumption: Every text is unique. It makes no difference whether the text is from the Old Testament or the New, keeping that assumption in mind may help to guard against preaching the same sermon every Sunday or from using the same application, no matter what the text: *This is the Word of the Lord. Now let’s go out and share it with our neighbors and relatives.* Just as the miracles of Jesus are all the same only different, so too are the Bible stories of the Old Testament. Jesus’ miracles all prove that he is the omnipotent Son of God who cares about our human condition. But each recorded miracle is at the same time unique, containing in its telling a lesson found nowhere else in quite the same way. So also the Bible history of the Old Testament. Each story makes the point that God is serious about his Word, both the law and the gospel.

Each story illustrates the truth that grace is always undeserved, that we live by faith, and that we walk as pilgrims under the cross.

The preacher is always looking for what makes these inspired words, this particular story, unique.

And at the same time each story is unique and sharpens our understanding of those eternal truths just a little bit more. It is part of the art of the preacher of the Word that he is always looking for what makes these inspired words, this particular story, unique. He is always asking the text: *What are you doing here? Of all the things that God could have said, could have told us about, why this?*

The Foundation – Year A

The worship planning spreadsheet (and PDF version) for the entire year has been available since mid-August. Advent through Epiphany had been posted in early June. Some materials such as the Preacher Podcast and graphics are still being provided as they become available.

To receive earliest notice of such materials, be sure to sign up for email notification of new resources at welscongregationalservices.net/subscriptions/. Pastors might want to encourage musicians to sign up for the Hymnal Highlight series, which offers practical and helpful ways to introduce new hymns.

Are you just now considering *The Foundation* for the first time? Be sure to review the introductory video at welscongregationalservices.net/foundation-yr-a/ and also *Worship the Lord* #111. A link is just under the video. Note that you can use *The Foundation* even if you don’t have the new hymnal. You can easily adapt the worship plan for CW21 in the Year A Planner to CW93. The new lectionary is available in the free test drive version of *CW Service Builder* (builder.christian-worship.com) and for purchase from Logos. Since the Gospel readings in the new lectionary are almost always identical to the old, you can still use *Planning Christian Worship* (worship.welsrc.net) for hymn suggestions if you’re still using CW93. Just watch for any hymns that focus on a First or Second Reading that might have changed in CW21.