

PREACH

the Word

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WHAT'S YOUR INTERPRETATION?

Something about the question, "What's your interpretation?" attacks my Lutheranism and triggers my confessional defense mechanisms.

Because I hold fast to *sola scriptura* and I have laid 2 Peter 1:20–21 onto the bowed head of a youth confirmand with extended hand and heart. Because I know what verbal inspiration means and I stand up for the right of the person in the pew to personally benefit from the teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness of the Scriptures without any help from me. Because I loathe TV preachers, religious groups, magazines, and movies that destroy the integrity of God's Word by their biased false doctrine so delightfully swallowed by millions. Because I appreciate the concept – the reality – of absolute truth. My life and my soul depend on that.

As with many other terms, however, I am a better preacher when I understand that the word "interpretation" can be used correctly. And it can be done correctly.

Joseph and Daniel interpreted dreams to God's glory. Corinthian Christians interpreted tongues to God's glory. Preachers can also interpret to God's glory. We exegize not just the Scriptures but our culture and our congregation. We apply absolute truth to stem cell research and teenagers who don't have a clue what a typewriter is. We conclude with our final amen, sighing a silent prayer that what we have said today will, according to our Lord's own promise, do its divine work in the different lives of our hearers in different ways at different times.

To that end, this issue of *Preach the Word* offers timely and practical helps for the correct interpretation of text, of listener, and of self. For the improvement of preaching and the glory of God!

LISTEN TO THE TEXT. STUDY THE LISTENER.

The careful preparation of preaching brings together two venues of God at work. He's at work through his Word. He's at work in the lives of people. A faithful preacher pays attention to both. You can read more about this and develop further skills by utilizing the study guides in this issue for Fred Craddock's *Preaching*. Enjoy below a number of examples gleaned from WELS preachers that highlight the intersecting of God's Word and God's people by preaching specific, textual law and gospel to specific, timely life situations.

"Love is ... not self-seeking" (1 Corinthians 13:4,5).

You see, people are by nature self-seeking, self-protective because they are haunted by a long memory of hurts. They remember being hurt already in elementary school by kids who made fun of their looks or their clothes, their mannerisms and anything that exposed a weakness. Romantic hurts and social slights in high school, coupled with academic and athletic failures, left further wounds in people's psyches. And that was before we entered what we were told was the dog-eat-dog world of competing for success, a world that leaves most of us losers – more than once. Memories accumulate of how ruthless people took advantage of us, how a boss never appreciated our effort, how a friend wasn't. Throw in the times that the family let us down, maybe a loved one abandoned us, and there is more than enough history to explain why vulnerable people build emotional walls to avoid any more hurt. "Take care of number one" is a philosophy of life touted by people who can't believe anyone else is going to take care of us. "I don't want to get involved" is the knee-jerk response of people who have painful memories from when they tried to get involved

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once. Love doesn't grow in the ruins of the past, behind walls of emotional self-protection.

"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28).

If keeping peace at the family reunion means biting your tongue when Uncle Charlie goes off again on how religion is just a crutch for the weak and people have to decide for themselves what's right and wrong, do you? What are you afraid of losing?

If the high school classmates you've tried so hard to fit in with invite you to a beer party at a home where the parents will be gone, do you go? What do you have to lose?

If your boss wants you to fudge numbers in the corporation's financial statement to stockholders, would you? What are you afraid of losing?

If it's just easier to work late or have a few drinks at the club and not have to deal with the problems accumulating at home, will you? What do you have to lose?

Have you shrunk the perimeter of your life in order to play it safe? Don't risk helping the homeless person who looks scary. Don't volunteer for a responsibility where you might fail. Don't voice God's perspective in a conversation because somebody smarter than you might make you look stupid. Don't get close enough to someone who needs your patient love, for fear that they might find out how weak and fragile you really are. What do you have to lose? Make sure you've thought that question through. You may have to lose your pride and dignity. You may have to lose your comfort zone and security blanket. Don't lose the promise of God.

"We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Several years ago, a "Peanuts" cartoon said: "Love means never having to say you're sorry." I don't buy that. It seems to me that love is never being afraid to say you're sorry. In a relationship that promises forgetting and forgiving love, we *can* admit our wrongs and know that they'll never be used against us. For Jesus' sake you have that relationship with your God. With Jesus' love, you can nurture that kind of relationship with family and friends.

Who is it that you want to love with forgetfulness? A spouse whose insensitivity has hurt you deeply? A child who has caused you so much pain, or a parent whose biting words have left scars? A friend whose betrayal has embittered you, or a neighbor whose attitude raises your blood pressure? Don't look at these people for a reason to forgive and forget. Look at Jesus. In the healing love of his forgiveness there is both reason and strength to love others with forgetfulness.

"When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me'" (James 1:13).

It's easy to turn trial into temptation and then blame God for our sin. For example, "It was a bad week at work, and that's why

I got drunk Friday night." "I've been feeling depressed for months, so you can hardly blame me for going off on my mother who's always telling me how I should feel." "I've been stuck in this lousy marriage for six years. Who wouldn't be tempted to look for a little affection elsewhere?" Trials either drive us to God for strength and love or they can push us over the edge of temptation. Then, in the whining tones of self-justification, we blame God. It sounds like this: "This wouldn't have happened if God hadn't put me in this impossible situation."

"We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1).

Here's what that looks like in your soul. No more anxiety attacks over what's going to happen to you, because God's not mad at you anymore. No more sleepless nights of worry, because the God who loves you runs the universe. Peace means we don't have to over-react to the problems we face or the injustices we suffer. God will right wrongs and turn things out for our good for Jesus' sake.

"...through whom we have gained access by faith into the grace in which we now stand" (Romans 5:2a).

Here's what that means for your soul. You won't get a computerized menu of options when you want to talk to God. You have direct access in prayer to the CEO of everything. You weren't given a spectator's ticket to the concert of God's grace; you have an "all access" pass that gets you backstage and involved in what God is doing on earth. You don't have to worry about dying before you can confess some sin, as though grace were like your boss's opinion of you – dependent on what you've done lately. Grace is your status with God, because it depends on what Jesus did, not what you do.

"And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:2b).

Here's how hope brings joy to your soul. You don't live in the past with bitterness and regrets; you are looking forward because you have an incredible future. No matter how rough life may be right now, someday soon you're going to be pain-free and celebrating in everlasting glory. Hope is how you face surgery or tough it out in a difficult work situation. Hope is where your heart is when your body is limping along.



listeners

PREACHING BY FRED B. CRADDOCK

Study Guide #5 – Study Your Listeners


Pages 84–98

The Listeners as Audience

Do you agree with the assessment that preachers ought to “get enough distance to understand and accept the listeners in and of themselves, apart from their relationship to the minister” (p. 87)?

The Listeners as Congregation

In answer to the question, “When will this sermon be heard?” Craddock remarks, “Astute politicians make modifications in their speeches according to the time of meeting; breakfast speeches, afternoon rally speeches, and evening speeches vary quite noticeably” (p. 93). Have you ever modified a sermon in such a way? If you would do so, what dynamics might you keep in mind that would result in such modification?

 A fuller version of Study Guide #5 is posted online at www.wels.net/ptw.

Study Guide #6 – Listen to Your Text

Pages 99–124

What do you think Craddock is trying to get across with his introductory comments? “In our discussion we are not yet to the point of preparing a sermon. Rather we are in the process of having something to say” (p. 99).

Selection of the Text

“Such preaching [from the lectionary] is not only more in keeping with prophetic tradition but more powerful in its effect, being less likely to have its birth, and often its death, in the private opinions of the minister.” What are some other benefits of preaching from the lectionary mentioned on pp. 101–105? Exceptions?

Setting the Text in Its Several Contexts

Literary: “While an episode in one of the Gospels may seem hardly related at all to what precedes or follows, the very location of that episode may have been an interpretive act on the part of the writer” (p. 114). How is such context similarly applied in the design of a sermon?


Putting the Text in One’s Own Words

What is the difference between what a text is saying and what a text is doing (pp. 122–124)?

 A fuller version of Study Guide #4 is posted online at www.wels.net/ptw.

SERMON HELPS

The following material is presented for two purposes, 1) to help you as a resource for sermon preparation in the weeks ahead, and 2) to help you as a model for communicating the Word. Glean what you wish. Repeat whatever is fitting. But whatever you do, be sure to pause, ponder, and listen to the message therein. Remember, preaching begins in the ear.

 A fuller version of these sermon helps is posted online at www.wels.net/ptw.

Seminary Graduation/Encouragement for the Ministry

 *From the sermon “Jesus Promises His Sufficient Grace” posted online at www.wels.net/ptw*

It really is true to say that, sometimes, God gives us his best gifts when he doesn’t seem to be giving us anything at all. Because there, right there, we see the power of grace.

The Baptism of Our Lord

Like young, little David, Jesus of Nazareth seemed the least likely to deliver anyone from any enemies. But anointed at his baptism with the Spirit’s power, Jesus conquered Satan the roaring lion to protect us – as surely as David overpowered a lion with his bare hands. Equipped at his baptism to do his Father’s will, Jesus faced the great enemy of death and defeated it with a stone rolled away from the tomb – as surely as David dropped Goliath with a stone from stream. As surely as Israel and their army didn’t become slaves to Goliath and the Philistines according to Goliath’s threats, we will not be slaves to our fears and guilt and loneliness. Who would have chosen David as Israel’s rescuer? Who would have chosen Jesus as ours?

Epiphany 2

A groom knows full well that the woman he marries isn’t perfect but on his wedding day the only thing on his mind is how perfect she is. God knows full well that you aren’t perfect, but in the unending wedding day of his committed love the only thing on his mind is how perfect you are cleansed by the blood of Christ.

Epiphany 3

I want to use band-aids and blame the system and burden others with the responsibility to do better when God says that I am the one who needs to change. Now. And I can’t. Worse yet, I don’t want to! But there is someone who wants me to. More importantly, he can fix my problems without my help. My servant. My Savior.

Epiphany 4

Today the fourth chapter of Luke teaches you that Jesus encountered and overcame resistance by looking for honor from heaven and finding it. For you. Now you can amaze people for the right reasons.

Epiphany 5

 *From the sermon “When Five Words Do More Than 10,000” posted online at www.wels.net/ptw*

This portion of the Bible about speaking in tongues doesn’t belong in some dusty book in an old library as a historical occurrence from

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ancient times. It belongs on the front page of today's newspaper and on the screen saver of your computer. It embodies the entire message of the Epiphany season. Your Savior makes himself known to you in a way that you understand.

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

 From the sermon "Transfiguration Is a Perspective-Altering Event" posted online at www.wels.net/ptw

The transfiguration was to be, for the disciples, a perspective-altering event. They thought Jesus should be pitied, because those horrible Jews were going to put him to death and there was no way for Jesus to avoid it. The transfiguration tells a different story.

Ash Wednesday

 From the sermon "Sadly Sing a Happy Song" posted online at www.wels.net/ptw


"God, let me tell you all about how lucky you are to have someone like me in your church. All glory be to me on high. Praise to me and adoration. Joyful, joyful, we adore me!"

Lent 1

"Take care of yourself. And don't trust God so much. You're hungry. You can help yourself! Do it! Take care of yourself! Nobody else will! ... Take the easy way. Wouldn't this be a better way to gain all the good things in the world? I can give them all to you! Their power, their splendor. Here is a crown with no thorns, a kingdom with no cross. Indulge yourself! ... Do something spectacular! Dare God! Try him out! He said he'd take care of you – I've got the verse in the Bible right here. God promised he'd send his angels. You believe that, don't you? Dare him!"

THEMES AND PARTS

The best kind of sermon themes, and their corresponding parts, are textual. So textual that, dare I say, one should be able to read them and determine almost instantly the exact portion of Scripture on which textual themes and parts are based. Here are a few examples. Can you determine the texts?

 You can check your accuracy online at www.wels.net/ptw.

Jesus, Just Say the Word

A humble faith that depends on Jesus' grace
A confident faith that understands Jesus' power

Where Do You Look for Help?

A false sense of security to be cursed
A real place of security to be blessed

(If) Christ Has (Not) Been Raised Repentance Says, "This Time It's Personal"

"I have sinned, and not someone else."

"I have saved, and not someone else."

When 5 Words Do More Than 10,000



OTHER RESOURCES AND IDEAS

- The 2007 Lenten resource kit from Northwestern Publishing House is available and worth a look. Go to www.nph.net and click on the resource kit image.
- Arrange a study group in your circuit, or with a neighboring pastor or two, to begin working through the study guides of Craddock's *Preaching* in 2007.
- Coming soon: watch www.wels.net/ptw for a video of a *Preach the Word* interview with Prof. John Jeske that includes material about sermon preparation, Lutheran preaching, and specific law and gospel.
- Log onto the archived issues of *Preach the Word* posted at www.wels.net/ptw for personal reading or group study.

There is no issue of *Worship the Lord* this month.



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