

PREACH

the Word

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PREACHING IN A MISSION SETTING

During my 19 years in the ministry, I have served two congregations. The congregation I was assigned to when I graduated from the seminary had about 1,000 communicants who worshiped in a beautiful, late-nineteenth century chapel with seating for over 500. It featured a ten foot tall altar, stained glass windows, and a magnificent pipe organ. The congregants were largely third or fourth generation members. Preaching there required climbing several steps to get into the ornate pulpit before proclaiming the familiar Word of God to the hundreds of worshipers who filled the century-old pews.

In contrast, when I arrived at my current call, there were twelve communicant members. It was what the Board for Home Missions called at that time an exploratory mission. We worshiped in rented facilities for many years, mostly using a classroom in a modified Quonset hut-like building. With a chalkboard behind me and worshipers sitting (and in the case of children, often *spinning*) in swivel desk chairs in front of me, preaching was certainly a different experience. As the church grew, converts soon outnumbered the core group, the majority of whom had little if any church background.

Yet in many ways – in fact, in the most important ways – my two congregations have been similar. Both congregations consisted of

members who needed to hear law and gospel regularly. Both saw visitors attending services who perhaps didn't know or believe in their Savior. Both churches I have served have been mission settings. And so is the one you serve.

So what does this mean, as far as our preaching is concerned? I'm certainly not contending that we dumb down our sermons, so that we preach only to those with lowest level of biblical literacy. Nor am I advocating that we regularly offer so-called seeker services. We do not want to restrict mature Christians to a milk-only diet when they long for more solid spiritual food. But neither do we want to overlook the unbelieving, unchurched, or immature that sit in our pews or swivel chairs. We dare not sacrifice the one for the other.

Recognizing that we preach in mission settings, no matter what the size, age, and make-up of our congregations, has many implications. Especially these points:

- **Make a conscious effort at proclaiming the basic message of law and gospel in every single sermon, clearly and repeatedly.** We need never apologize for proclaiming the same message Sunday after Sunday. In fact, we ought to apologize if we *don't*.

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WISDOM FROM WALTHER

Almost 125 years ago, Dr. Walther warned aspiring preachers to be careful that their preaching style and language not become a barrier to their listeners' faith. Here's a quote from his 18th evening lecture that bears repeating.

"Alas! There are other preachers, who, while they are believers, preach in such high-flown language that it passes the comprehension of the people. In such instances we behold the spectacle of a believing pastor and a congregation of spiritually dead people. Not only must we proclaim the truth, we must also speak a language so simple that a peasant listening outside of the sanctuary can understand it and feel himself drawn into the church. With noonday clearness we must show the one way of salvation than which there is no other. It would not be surprising if God were to hurl His lightning at every preacher who has filled his manuscript with high-flown terms, intending to shine by his oratory. Such language is not understood by the common people. It may, at best, enter their intellect, but it does not enter their hearts, where it ought to lodge" (pp.181, 182).

(Walther, C.F.W. *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO 1986).

PEW VIEW

Former preacher/current plumber Freddy Krieger shares some more insights into preaching. This time, he writes not so much from his perspective as a pew viewer as from his former perspective as a pastor.

Monday Exegesis?

I think it was Professor Balge who once commented that, while in the pastoral ministry, he couldn't imagine a Monday morning without an exegesis. To which most of us got a pretty good laugh.

I guess we envisioned – with our untested seminary eyes – that Monday would be our day off. Not until my eighth year in the ministry was I won over to his wisdom. Not that I had planned it that way. Here's how I "fell into" it. And what a blessed "fall" it was. Maybe it's something you might want to "fall for," if you haven't already.

For some reason, our church elected to institute Thursday evening mid-week worship services for those going out of town for the weekend. That meant that my sermon had to be done by Thursday now. Well, no more Saturday late-night sermon sessions, anyway! But what I couldn't figure out was how to pull off a prepared sermon by Thursday.

The next thing that happened made it a lot easier. On Wednesday morning, seven or eight regular adult Bible study students met at a backroom at a downtown member's business for what was called a "Pericope Bible Study." Quite an advanced Bible study this was! I can't remember if it was my idea or theirs. I think it was theirs.

They studied the lessons for the coming Sunday intensely, with the aim of assisting in the development of the upcoming sermon. I, having studied each lesson by in-depth exegesis in advance, shared my thoughts and insights with them. Based on the pericope, they shared their thoughts and insights with me. The link between the three lessons was discovered, often suggesting a theme. The Scriptures were squeezed like a sponge. And yes, when focused, a small group can squeeze out a lot in an hour's time! My notes taken at the class were sometimes more extensive than my notes from before the class.

Often they offered good suggestions for sermon illustrations and

applications. Sometimes their recommendations determined which lesson would be the sermon text. Due to the small number of participants, their questions were especially in depth, and their ideas and insights were caringly acute. These people were sharp. And I had to be ready.

That's why Monday and Tuesday exegesis became a weekly scheduled discipline. Monday morning's schedule intentionally omitted all administrative pastoral duties. Four or five solid hours blocked off for uninterrupted exegesis. Tuesday morning's schedule was the same. The important administrative things could easily be scheduled and taken care of after those important morning appointments. The church secretary screened the calls to the church. If they needed to speak to the pastor, it could easily be postponed until after 12:00 or 1:00. Rare were the true emergencies that infringed upon this schedule.

By Tuesday noon I was ready for the pericope study. Sermon thoughts came readily and unexpectedly after the early-week exegesis was completed. With the pericope study "in the bag," compiling the actual sermon to prepare for Thursday evening seemed to be the easy part. And I think the emphasis on exegesis and the pericope study made it that way.

Now, I know, this might not work in all the situations and circumstances in which you find yourselves. But maybe it would. At the very least, it's worth a thought. It worked for me; it might work for you. Prioritize exegesis, schedule it as early as possible in the new week, and see what happens in your situation.

(This discipline necessitated "advance block scheduling" of the week to come, but that's another article outside the scope of this series; anyone interested in that can contact me by email and I'll give you some ideas I *schmeared* from somebody smarter than I).

Monday morning exegesis. Wish I had done it seven years earlier. Thanks, Prof. Balge!

Monday morning exegesis. Made it easy to take Saturdays off. I and many in the congregation benefitted.

Monday morning exegesis? Try it, if you haven't already!

CHRIST REVEALED

This year calls for six Sundays between the Epiphany of our Lord and the Transfiguration of our Lord. How is Christ revealed in the Gospel for these Sundays?

Epiphany 1 – The Baptism of our Lord

July 4, 1776. December 7, 1941. September 11, 2001. These are days that marked turning points for our nation. Can you think of a single day or event that marked a major turning point in your life? Jesus' baptism by John certainly marked a turning point in his life. So did our baptism.

Epiphany 2

"There's someone I'd like you to meet." From blind dates to potential business deals, introductions are important to our lives. Philip introduced his friend Nathanael to someone very important. Who introduced you to Jesus? Whom can you introduce Jesus to today?

Epiphany 3

When a dog bites a man, that's not news. When a man bites dog, it's a different story. Same with a man catching a fish vs. a fish catching a man. That's what makes this Sunday's Old Testament reading so memorable. But in a sense, the Gospel presents a similar scenario: fish (ἰχθύς) catches men.

Epiphany 4

Imagine going to church and hearing none other than Jesus preach! That's what worshipers at the synagogue in Capernaum were treated to one Sabbath. And that's what we're treated to every Sunday, as we encounter Jesus in Word and Sacrament.

Epiphany 5

When we hurt, often our natural tendency is to withdraw into ourselves, or perhaps to lash out at others, like a wounded animal, rather than reaching out for help. But Christ reveals himself as the Great Physician who has both pity and power to heal. Confidently turn to him in every trouble!

Epiphany 6

"The devil is in the details." There may be truth in this familiar maxim, but this Sunday's Gospel shows that the Savior is often also found in the details. Leprosy was as ugly as it was contagious. Yet when a man afflicted with this awful disease came to him, Jesus "reached out his hand and touched the man." Note this amazing detail, and behold the loving touch of our powerful Savior!



THE MIRACLE OF THE TRANSFIGURATION

Christ's miracles are well-known, but often misunderstood. While most recognize the element of compassion in Christ's miracles, especially the healing miracles, many miss their underlying purpose. This purpose was clearly understood by the disciples who witnessed Christ's first miracle at Cana. "He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him," St. John tells us.

The Transfiguration of our Lord is a miracle that dramatically revealed his glory, yet provided no physical benefit to anyone. Dr. Siegbert Becker eloquently brought out this truth in a sermon for Transfiguration Sunday.

"While it is true that most of the miracles of Jesus were done to help people in their need, and it is easy for that reason to use the miracle stories as a basis for preaching the so-called social gospel, yet the story of the transfiguration of the Savior pulls us up short and makes us realize that this cannot be the significance of his miracles. The transfiguration is a great miracle. But by this miracle no hungry people were fed, no one was saved from drowning, and no sick person was cured. It did nothing for the disciples except to give them a glimpse of the Savior's glory. It helped to impress upon them the truth which was proclaimed to them out of the cloud that overshadowed them, and out of which they heard a voice that said, 'This is my beloved Son.'"

(From *The Word Goes On: Sermons by Dr. Siegbert Becker*, Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, WI, 1992, p.86).

Preachers do well regularly to remind their hearers of the main purpose of Christ's miracles. And the Transfiguration of our Lord provides us with an excellent and obvious opportunity to do just that.

JESUS, TAKE US TO THE MOUNTAIN

One of the gems written by the late Jaroslav Vajda included in Christian Worship Supplement is this Transfiguration hymn. Christ's glory revealed on that mountain foreshadowed the ultimate display of glory at Calvary. What an awesome privilege is ours to see and proclaim that glory before we lead our members down the dark road to the cross.

Jesus, take us to the mountain Where,
with Peter, James, and John,
We are dazzled by your glory,
Light as blinding as the sun.
There prepare us for the night
By the vision of that sight.

What do you want us to see there
That your close companions saw?
Your divinity revealed there
Fills us with the self-same awe.
Clothed in flesh like ours you go,
Matched to meet our deadliest foe.

What do you want us to hear there
That your dear disciples heard?
Once again the voice from heaven
Says of the incarnate Word:
"Listen, listen, ev'ryone;
This is my beloved Son!"

Take us to that other mountain
Where we see you glorified,
Where you shouted, "It is finished!"
Where for all the world you died.
Hear the stunned centurion:
"Truly this was God's own Son!"

We who have beheld your glory,
Risen and ascended Lord,
Cannot help but tell the story,
All that we have seen and heard,
Say with Peter, James, and John:
"You are God's beloved Son!"

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- **Limit theological jargon and “church-speak,” or briefly explain terms.** “Incarnation,” “eschatology,” and “godhead” may be understood by lifelong WELSers (or not), but it’s likely that many who listen to your sermons have no clue what these words refer to.
- **Give more Bible history background.** Don’t assume that your hearers are familiar with the fact that Israel divided into two kingdoms following Solomon’s reign, or even Bible accounts like Gideon’s victory or Saul’s conversion.
- **Ensure that the gospel predominates our sermons.** This includes the conclusion. Write your sermon as if it will be the last time your hearers are exposed to the gospel. It just might be!

Once in a while, we hear references to “mission vs. maintenance ministries.” Can we strike that from our collective vocabularies? Every gospel ministry is a mission ministry. And our sermons ought to reflect that fact. Case in point: one Sunday many years ago, a delinquent member showed up for worship. He hadn’t set foot in church in quite some time. When I greeted him after the service, I noted that he didn’t look quite right. Later, I learned that he was admitted to the hospital that afternoon. The next morning, he died. Although he had been a life-long member of the congregation and even attended the Lutheran Elementary School, this man was a mission prospect in the truest sense of the word. He desperately needed to hear the law’s condemnation and the gospel comforting forgiveness.

So does everyone else who hears our preaching.

Whether our congregations are big or small; whether they depend on Home Missions subsidy or they celebrated their 150th anniversary; whether the majority of our flocks are lifelong believers or baby Christians; whether we see dozens of visitors each Sunday, or mostly members fill the pews – all of us serve in mission settings. May our sermons always reflect that fact.



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