

PREACH

the Word

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THE SERMON IN WORSHIP: THE INFLUENCE OF THE GOSPEL

By James Tiefel

No one who reads this little newsletter would disagree that the words and works of Jesus are the center of the Scriptures and the cornerstone of Christian teaching. John summarized his account of Jesus' ministry by writing, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31). The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, recorded in the Gospels, stand at the center of God's revelation to the human race. The Old Testament books look ahead to Jesus, and the New Testament letters are based on Jesus' words and works. It was probably Luther who said, "The Bible is all Christ."

The Gospel in Worship

We don't have a clear record of the formation of the Christian rite, but evidence suggests that early worship orders placed a special emphasis on the words and works of Jesus.

Think of the situation in Jerusalem after Pentecost. For as long as they could remember, Jewish believers had followed the same order of service when they gathered for synagogue worship: opening prayers, a reading from the Law, several psalms sung by the congregation, a reading from the Prophets, and a commentary usually delivered by the rabbi. Even after Pentecost, that progression seems to have remained in place; it's what the believers were used to. What changed was the content of the commentary. The apostles did exactly what Jesus had done in the Nazareth synagogue: they explained the Old Testament Scriptures in light of the words and works of Jesus. Jesus made it clear after his resurrection, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). The apostles had seen the words and works of Jesus, and they were in a perfect position to proclaim how Jesus had fulfilled the Old Testament Word in what he said and did.

After the apostles died, the Gospels preserved the apostles' teaching. Just as the words and works of Jesus had been central



in worship in Jerusalem, they became the center of the order of service that began to flow out of the western church. The synagogue's speak-sing-speak-sing pattern remained; readings from the Old Testament and the Epistles were punctuated by psalms. But the liturgy considered the reading of the Gospel the high point of the service of the Word. Choirs announced the Gospel with alleluias; the people stood when the Gospel was announced and shouted their acclamations before and after the reading: "Glory be to you, O Lord!" "Praise be to you, O Christ!"

The church year seems to have developed with the same priority in mind. From season to season and Sunday to Sunday the Gospels followed the path of Jesus' life and ministry. The Sunday "theme" is probably a 20th century development, but it recognizes the concept that was implicit in the historic calendar. No one was debating the inspiration of the other readings or their value for faith and life. The point of the ceremonies and the calendar was simply that the words and works of Jesus were the center of the Scriptures and the cornerstone of Christian teaching.

As we know, Luther had no interest in changing the church's historic worship patterns, and he passed on that respect to the confessors who followed him. As they raised the priority of

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preaching in Lutheran worship, Lutheran pastors retained the custom (actually regulated by law in some provinces) of preaching the Sunday sermon on the appointed Gospel and preaching the Epistle at midweek Matins. The German churches developed a set of hymns that matched the Gospel, and these hymns became the impetus for the great Lutheran choral and organ music of the 17th and 18th centuries.

The Sermon Independent from the Gospel

Some of us remember when the same Gospels were read on the same Sundays year after year. The historic lectionary was entrenched in Lutheran worship, even published in some hymnals. We could expect Pietists to tire of preaching on the historic lessons, but even orthodox pastors began looking for sermon variety. Series of alternate sermon texts appeared (e.g., Eisenach and Thomasius) and became popular.

Our homiletics professors encouraged us to preach through the historic lessons to begin our ministry, but many pastors quickly moved on to alternate Gospel and Epistles texts and even to texts from the Old Testament (although rarely). In most churches, the pastor read the historic readings from the lectern, but preached on another text. There were some connections between the day's Gospel and the sermon text, but there was little thought of pointing out the relationship. A general mindset was developing, at least in the minds of most preachers, that the pulpit was independent from the lectern and the church year. A few liturgical voices attempted to point out the connections to the historic Gospels, but their suggestions were often so contrived that they elicited a warning in the seminary's homiletics manual, *Preach the Gospel* (p. 159).

1973. Red letter date: the Lutheran version of the three year lectionary appeared. Modeled after the Vatican II innovation and prepared by the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, it quickly caught the attention of WELS preachers. With the 1993 publication of *Christian Worship*, a version of the three-year series became normative in WELS.

Moving Back to a Focus on the Gospel

One feature of the three-year lectionary was its *lectio continua* Epistles. In an effort to "open up the treasures of the Scriptures" to laypeople, the new lectionary included lengthy strings of Epistle readings from the same letter. For example, Year A has seven lessons in a row from 1 Corinthians. There was no effort to match the focus of the day's Gospel, and with a mindset that the lectern and the pulpit were independent, preaching *lectio continua* Epistles wasn't a problem for most WELS preachers.

Other aspects of the three-year lectionary, however, renewed a focus on the Gospel of the Day. The framers of the lectionary selected lessons from the Old Testament with a purposeful eye toward the Gospel, and the connections aren't contrived. The man who preaches the First Lesson on Lent 4C (Isaiah 12:1-6) isn't doing eisegesis when he connects "Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me" with the parable of the prodigal Son in the day's Gospel (Luke 15).

The brothers who prepared the lectionary in *Christian Worship: Supplement* have taken the effort a step farther. They've offered Epistle texts and Old Testament narrative texts with the same purposeful eye toward the Gospel of the Day. Thanks to their careful work, we have a set of texts that not only offer delightful variety, but also enable us to keep our attention on the words and works of Jesus proclaimed in the Sunday Gospel.

Preaching the First and Second Lesson in Light of the Gospel

Perhaps we'll begin to see a mindset change as preachers notice the symmetry in the CWS lessons. As we find those connections, we may also find more of the connections that exist in the original CW lessons. Finding these associations will help us preach the specific truth found in the day's Gospel even as we preach Old Testament and Epistle texts.

It does take extra work to do this. The old axiom maintains that there are a hundred sermons in every text, and preachers certainly are able to preach CWS and CW lessons without pointing to the specific thought of the Gospel. The preacher needs to understand the main point of the Gospel before he begins working on his text. Then he needs to identify the points that are similar between the two readings. When readings have been carefully selected, the connections will be there.

The Gospel for Lent 5A is from John 11, the raising of Lazarus, which includes the beautiful passage that begins "I am the resurrection and the life." The obvious theme is Jesus' confrontation with death and his power over it. The CW Second Lesson is Romans 8:11-19, part of Paul's magnificent comparison between the principle of sin and death and the principle of the Spirit of life. A sermon on the Romans lesson could go in many different directions, but, taking a cue from 8:11, here is an outline that specifically points to the day's Gospel:

Our Bodies Will Live Again!

1. The Spirit gives us the living Christ
2. The Spirit leads us away from sin
3. The Spirit makes us the sons of God

The Gospel for Easter 6A is John 14:15-21. Jesus was speaking to his disciples and said: "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him." The CWS First Lesson is Genesis 4:1-16, the account of Cain and Able. Here's an outline that demonstrates the truth of Jesus' words from a negative perspective:

The Horrible Problem with Hate

1. It begins in a heart turned against God
2. It ends in an act turned against a brother

The Gospel for Epiphany 2B is John 1:43-51, the call of Philip and Nathanael. An outline for the CWS First Lesson, 1 Samuel 3:1-10, the call of Samuel, picks up the Gospel theme but is still true to the Old Testament text.

The Lord Calls Us to Serve

1. His call is often confusing
2. His call is always compelling

In John 10:1-10 for Easter 4A Jesus calls himself the gate for the sheep and identifies himself as our uniquely qualified Savior. Are you willing to preach David as a type of Christ? Here's an outline for the CWS First Lesson, 1 Samuel 17:34-37:

Here Is a Shepherd-King for the People of God

1. One who trusts in the promises of God
2. One who wins victories for God's people

The Bible is All Christ

Thankfully, we don't hear or preach many sermons that fail to point hearers to Jesus. A little extra work and study may enable us to point our message more pointedly! Especially when the lectionary readings have been chosen to relate specifically to one another, we have an opportunity to apply and enhance the focus of the day's Gospel even when we don't preach on the Gospel. What a natural way to help the saints see that the Bible is all Christ!

PREACHING FROM THE SUPPLEMENTAL LECTIONARY

In past articles about preaching from the revised lectionary in *Christian Worship: Supplement*, we covered:

- 1) Rationale behind the CWS lectionary.
- 2) Reasons preachers need to plan ahead.
- 3) The potential problem of duplicate lessons.

CW OT Narratives vs. CWS OT Narratives

This article takes up another unique challenge of preaching from the CWS lectionary – preaching Old Testament narratives. The CWS lectionary committee aimed for fewer OT lessons from the prophets, and instead, “more familiar Bible stories” (Keith Wessel, chair of rites subcommittee).

Familiarity will vary, but a scan of the lessons in *Christian Worship* and in *Christian Worship: Supplement* shows 54 OT narratives in the CW first lessons, but 115 OT narratives in the CWS first lessons. The CWS lectionary, then, has more than twice as many OT narratives as CW. To put it another way, 62%, or 115 out of 185 OT first lessons (10 CWS first lessons are from Acts) are OT narratives. In CW 31% of OT first lessons are OT narratives.

A sampling of OT narratives in the CWS lectionary, not found in CW:

- Genesis 4:1-16 *Cain and Abel*
- Genesis 6:9-22, 7:11-23 *The flood*
- Genesis 14:8-24 *Abram and Melchizedek*
- Joshua 7:16-26 *Achan*
- Judges 7:1-8 *Gideon*
- Judges 13:6-24 *Samson's birth*
- 2 Samuel 24:10-25 *David and the plague*
- Daniel 3:16-28 *The fiery furnace*
- Jonah 4:5-11 *Jonah and the vine*

Potential Pitfalls

You may say, “Great. Concrete is better than abstract. My people perk up at stories. OT narratives are easier to preach than OT prophecies. *No problema.*”



But Haddon Robinson's take on Jesus' parables applies to OT narratives, too. Accounts like Jonah and the vine resemble saxophones – easy to play badly.¹ Mis-preaching Old Testament narratives is easy? Yes. Mistakes like the following should be obvious, but experience shows otherwise.

1. You could *analyze* and outline the text in the pulpit, retelling the story faithfully, without showing its malady and its specific good news to God's sinners/saints. Bryan Chappell writes, “A former student recently telephoned me for assistance because his congregation seemed to be growing less and less responsive to his preaching. ‘Last Sunday during the sermon,’ he said, ‘they just looked at me like they were lumps on a log. I got no feedback whatsoever. What am I doing wrong?’

“I asked him to describe his sermon to me. He responded by giving me the main points of his outline:

- Noah was wise.
- Noah was fearless.
- Noah was faithful.

“‘I understand,’ I said. ‘Now, why did you tell them that?’

“There was a long pause on the other end of the phone line. Then he groaned. ‘Oh yeah. I forgot!’

“Information without application yields frustration. This old adage rings true for preachers as well as for parishioners. Preachers who cannot answer ‘so what?’ will preach to a ‘who cares?’”²

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2. You could wrongly *economize* your study time, deciding before you dig into a text how it applies to you and your flock.
3. You could *minimize* sin's curse and God's grace in an effort to maximize the background and vivid details of the story.
4. Similarly, trying to be practical, you could unwittingly center on people instead of Christ and *moralize* in a Christ-less way. An over-the-top, overly-brief example of this: "Jonah shouldn't have gotten so angry. You shouldn't get so angry, either."
5. You could *allegorize*. Luther commented at his table in 1532, "When I was a monk I was a master in the use of allegories. I allegorized everything. Afterward through the Epistle to the Romans I came to some knowledge of Christ. I recognized then that allegories are nothing, that it's not what Christ signifies but what Christ is that counts. Before I allegorized everything, even a chamber pot, but afterward I reflected on the histories and thought how difficult it must have been for Gideon to fight with his enemies in the manner reported [Judges 7:1-23]. If I had been there I would have befouled my breeches for fear. It was not allegory, but it was the Spirit and faith that inflicted such havoc on the enemy with only three hundred men" (LW, Vol. 54, p. 46).

Pointers

What should we do instead? Preach the law as a haymaker, as the first article in the last PTW potently put it. Preach to sorry sinners the good news of Christ crucified, risen, and reigning. Every text points to Christ, the only Savior. Some specific ideas for preaching Christ-centered OT narratives from the CWS lectionary:

1. Think about the place of your text in the big scope of God's rescue. Where would your narrative have fit in on the road to Emmaus, as Jesus uncovered his place in the Old Testament, step by step? How does your text fit Sunday's Gospel?
2. Consider the plot of the whole book you're in. Ask yourself, "What's the main point of Judges?" "Of Daniel?" How does this main point relate to the particular narrative you will preach to your flock?

Also observe where your narrative fits into the flow of the whole book. For instance, Gideon and Abimelech's account, which starts and ends in the geographic center of Israel, notably takes place in the center of Judges, as well – the fourth of its seven main narratives.

3. Take time to ponder why God included certain details in the book you're preaching from, or in your text, and omitted others. Marvel at the brevity of the Scriptures. In them God never wasted a word.

An example: in 1 Samuel, why doesn't God tell us about the birth of Saul or David, but does describe the birth and upbringing of Samuel?

"This in itself accentuates the importance the author attached to Samuel's role in the events that follow. He seems to be saying in a subtle way that flesh and blood are to be subordinated to word and Spirit in the process of the establishment of kingship. [...] Kingship is given its birth and then nurtured by the prophetic word and work of the prophet Samuel."⁴

4. Think like a playwright or short story author; sometimes make your main point more inductively than deductively. Without undercutting the good news of Christ in the text, how could you maintain proper tension within your listeners by not solving the malady of the text at the outset, but waiting until near the end of the sermon? For an inductive example from an Old Testament narrative, watch Ken Cherney's Ash Wednesday sermon from 2 Samuel 12 at <http://vimeo.com/8869970>.
5. Want more guidance? Read judiciously an article by Daniel Block.⁵

Daniel Witte

¹ I am indebted to Steven Mathewson for this analogy. His *Bibliotheca Sacra* article, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming Old Testament Narratives," doesn't merit a blanket endorsement but may help you. http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_mathewson.html

² Bryan Chappell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), page 56. This portion is online: <http://www.preaching.com/printerfriendly/11550666/1>. Do you wonder if Chappell's comment shows too little trust in the Word's power? Compare Walther: "When preparing to preach, the preacher must draw up a strategical plan in order to win his hearers for the kingdom of God. Otherwise the hearers may say of his sermon, 'Oh, that was nice!' but that will be all. They leave the church with an empty heart" (*Law and Gospel*, p. 23).

⁴ *Concordia Self-Study Bible*, page 371.

⁵ "Tell Me the Old, Old Story: Preaching the Message of Old Testament Narrative," from *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts* by David Howard. (Kregel Academic, 2004.) Most of the chapter is readable online via Google Books and the "Search Inside" feature at Amazon: <http://tinyurl.com/y8tq27d> and <http://tinyurl.com/ycr6zmmw>.



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