

# PREACH

*the Word*

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## THE SERMON IN WORSHIP: LITURGICAL PREACHING

By James Tiefel

The sermon rarely stands alone in Lutheran worship. On a typical Sunday or festival, we preach in a defined context and as part of a larger framework. That framework is usually one of the services in *Christian Worship* or *Christian Worship Supplement*. Since the main services in our hymnals are based on the Christian liturgy, we often call the kind of preaching we do *liturgical preaching*.

There's a lot of confusion these days about the word *liturgical* and *liturgical worship*. People use the terms with different definitions, and people who hear them don't always understand what's being said. To some the word *liturgical* connotes high ceremony and formality; liturgical worship is "high church" to them. In some circles, especially where people are troubled by worship debates, liturgical becomes almost a synonym for confessional, as in "Confessional Lutherans are liturgical." Lay people don't use the word very often, but probably understand liturgical worship to be worship that uses the services in the hymnal. Unfortunately, these definitions don't really help in discussions about worship or preaching.

To get a handle on liturgical preaching, we need to go back a step and define the word *liturgy*. To some, a liturgy is nothing more than an order of service. They'll say, "The liturgy for tonight is Evening Prayer" or "We had a special liturgy on Christmas Day." In an era when people throw around terms like *liturgical* and *non-liturgical*, we pastors (and laypeople, too) need a more precise definition.

Try this: The liturgy is an order of service based on the historic worship rite of the Christian Church. The liturgy has its roots in the Old Testament synagogue service that was adapted by early Christians, but the rite has never been static. Christians across the globe have worshiped with the liturgy in countless languages and musical settings. Despite its long and wide use, however, the liturgy invariably retains its basic form. It has two main parts, the Service of the Word and the Service of the Sacrament. It includes a set of song texts that summarize the most important teachings of the Bible (the Ordinary) and a set of readings, prayers, psalms, and hymns (the Proper) selected to match the emphases of the



Christian calendar. It has an obvious progression and a clear flow of thought. Compare Luther's two Reformation-era services (*Formula Missae* and *Deutsche Messe*) with *The Common Service* in *The Lutheran Hymnal* and the *Service of Word and Sacrament* in *Christian Worship*. For all their differences, the four services are easily identified as versions of the liturgy.

The reality is that *liturgical worship* has nothing to do with formal or casual, high church or low, KJV or NIV, confessional or non-confessional, traditional or contemporary. Liturgical worship is nothing more than worship based on the presuppositions, practices, and progression of the historic Christian liturgy.

### What Is Liturgical Preaching?

Like the liturgy, liturgical preaching assumes the Christian church year. For the liturgical preacher, January 9, 2011, is more than the second Sunday in January; it's also the First Sunday after the Epiphany. The liturgical preacher understands that his sermon is

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going to expand on the thought of the Gospel of the Day, i.e., the account of Jesus' baptism. He assumes that the First and Second Lessons, like the other parts of the Proper, have been selected to match the focus of the day. He chooses one of the three appointed readings as the sermon text or selects another text that focuses on the Gospel's theme.

Does liturgical preaching discourage the preacher from planning a special sermon series? Not at all. The late Easter date in 2011 allows for a full Epiphany season; the calendar includes all eight Sundays after the Epiphany as well as the last Sunday, the Transfiguration. The preacher might replace the five Gospels taken from the Sermon on the Mount (beginning on Epiphany 4) with a five part series on a subject he senses would be valuable in his congregation. A little extra work would provide readings, a psalm, hymns, and a new Prayer of the Day that match the focus of the series texts.

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### **An Hour and Five**

It's not an overstatement to say that liturgical preaching has been and remains the most common preaching style of Lutheran preachers. Luther made it his choice in 1523 and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary encourages it in 2010. But today's liturgical preacher faces a challenge that Luther and his colleagues never experienced: the tyrant of time. Once upon a time Lutheran churchgoers expected an hour sermon and weren't put off by two or three hour services. Those days are long gone. Today worshipers expect (and Sunday schedules often demand) that worship last no longer than an hour. They'll give us 65 minutes if they're in a good mood.

To meet the challenge of "an hour and five" limit (especially when Holy Communion is offered), some eliminate sections of the liturgy. Worship planners remove the *Gloria*, one or two readings, or the Preface and *Sanctus* in the Service of the Sacrament. Another time-saving device is to read two lessons at the lectern and the sermon text from the pulpit.

There are ways to meet the time challenges, however, without altering the pattern and progression of the liturgy. Many WELS congregations would be wise to review their communion distribution procedures. An efficient distribution need not detract from the dignity of the Meal and can shorten the service by ten minutes or more. Lengthy introductions to readings can be replaced by a well-planned sentence or two. Pastors might ask if announcements at the end of the service are really necessary when they simply repeat information in the bulletin.

And then there's the length of the sermon. Liturgical preachers can come to respect the framework in which they preach and shorten

their sermons rather than eliminate Scripture readings, the Psalm of the Day, or songs of the Ordinary. Especially when the Sacrament is offered, a fifteen minute sermon may be exactly the right length. The preacher who knows he needs to make his point quickly might make his point more effectively!

### **The Trouble with Tradition**

Some pastors may feel that the suggestion to retain the various parts of the liturgy at the expense of the sermon raises tradition above preaching. But there are traditions associated with preaching that can compromise the value of the liturgy.

It is our long-stranding custom to read the sermon text at the beginning of the sermon, and preachers usually quote the text again during the course of the sermon. In an effort to save time, some pastors read the other appointed readings from the lectern and then read the sermon text at the beginning of the sermon. Since there are only two readings in this scenario, either the Psalm or the Verse of the Day is eliminated. This becomes a problem when the sermon text is the day's Gospel. If the preacher reads the Gospel from the pulpit, the ceremonies that surround the Gospel –alleluias, acclamations, and standing – surround the Second Lesson instead. The entire point of these ceremonies, to highlight the words and works of Jesus, is lost.

It's hard for some preachers to modify the traditions associated with the beginning of a sermon, but there are other ways to approach this. The pastor reads all three lessons from the lectern, with the Psalm and Verse of the Day in place and with the Gospel ceremony surrounding the actual reading of the Gospel. In his introductions to the readings, the preacher identifies the sermon text: "The Gospel serves as the basis for the sermon this morning." In the pulpit the preacher begins with a greeting and then moves directly to the sermon introduction. At the end of the introduction he points to the text: "This is exactly what Jesus had in mind in the Gospel for today. Let's listen to Jesus again and hear him tell us: 'Baptism – my baptism and your baptism – unites you with God.'" As usual he quotes the text in the course of his sermon.

### **Liturgical Preaching Honors and Appreciates the Liturgy**

There is no list of rules for liturgical preaching or liturgical preachers. No one insists that "Thou shalt not eliminate a part of the liturgy" or "Thou shalt preach only on the basis of the lectionary." The liturgical preacher simply recognizes that his voice isn't the only voice proclaiming the gospel in the liturgy. The preacher places parameters around himself, therefore, so the other voices can be heard as well. The Spirit doesn't work only through proclamation that comes from the pulpit; he works wherever the gospel is announced: in the readings, psalm, and verse, in the songs of the Ordinary, in the prayers and praise that surround the Sacrament and that come from the pews. As one of our teachers told us: "Sometimes you walk back to the sacristy and say, 'Thank God for good hymns!'" In other words, liturgical preaching doesn't limit the preacher; it actually supports him and enhances his preaching. And that's why liturgical preaching has been the Lutheran paradigm for so many centuries.

## PREACHING FROM THE SUPPLEMENTAL LECTIONARY

When lectionary preaching first became the norm among WELS preachers, men often followed the one-year lectionary in *The Lutheran Hymnal* (1941), the historic series. These TLH Gospels ended each church year and began the next:

23rd after Trinity	Mt 22:15-22	Taxes to Caesar?
24th after Trinity	Mt 9:18-26	Jairus' Daughter Raised
25th after Trinity	Mt 24:15-28	Jerusalem's Fall, Christ's Return
26th after Trinity	Mt 25:31-46	King, Sheep and Goats
27th after Trinity	Mt 25:1-13	Wise and Foolish Virgins
Advent 1	Mt 21:1-9	Palm Sunday
Advent 2	Lk 21:25-36	The Second Coming
Advent 3	Mt 11:2-10	The Baptist in Prison
Advent 4	Jn 1:19-28	John Readies the Way

As today, years with earlier Easters had more Sundays after Trinity. If we all still followed the TLH lectionary, then, we would skip these Sundays after Trinity:

- 2010: 26th-27th
- 2011: 23rd-27th
- 2012: 26rd-27th
- 2013: 27th
- 2014: 24rd-27th
- 2015: 26th-27th
- 2016: 27th
- 2017: 25th-27th

So?

So years like 2013 and 2016 would give many chances to tell God's people God's ultimate warnings and promises. In years like 2011, 2014, and 2017, though, only the Gospel of Advent 2 would lead listeners to the Last Day.<sup>1</sup>

The Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship three-year lectionary, which many WELS congregations started using in the 70s and 80s, added more texts, but had similar pros and cons as the historic series, with End Time preaching.

In 1993 *Christian Worship* appeared, with a unique solution for ending the church year. Omissions occur before the last four Sundays of the church year. Those four each have a distinct theme, repeated annually. Late 2010 covers these texts.

Reformation C	Jn 8:31-36	The Truth Will Set You Free
Last Judgment C	Lk 19:11-27	Parable of the Minas
Saints Triumphant C	Lk 20:27-38	Children of the Resurrection
Christ the King C	Lk 23:35-43	With Me in Paradise



Advent 1 A	Mt 24:37-44	The Coming of the Son of Man
Advent 2 A	Mt 3:1-12	John Preaches Repentance
Advent 3 A	Mt 11:2-11	The Baptist in Prison
Advent 4 A	Mt 1:18-25	The Virgin Will Conceive

The lectionary in *Christian Worship: Supplement* (2008) keeps these Gospels. The new supplemental lectionary expands choices for First and Second Lessons, but generally not for the CW Gospels.

The plus for preachers with CW and CWS? Each year the four Sundays of End Time all have a distinct focus. Quite similar Sundays, with different readings, follow the next year. Also, compared to the historic series, we can preach more end-times texts, predictably. Every three years, for example, a text frequently skipped in the historic series, Matthew 25:1-13, is the Gospel for Saints Triumphant, the second-to-last Sunday in year A.<sup>2</sup>

A challenge now, according to informal interviews with a WLS homiletics professor and several other experienced WELS preachers, is that End Time and Advent themes may seem to overlap. Whether you're following the CW or CWS lectionary, it is easy to say that Jesus is coming again, three Sundays in a row (Last Judgment, Saints Triumphant and Christ the King) – only to realize that two to three Sundays in Advent intend a similar focus.

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How do you keep the same topic fresh for many weeks in a row, especially during busy days?<sup>3</sup>

1) A possibility your author discourages: Rotating through the First and Second Lessons and Gospels weekly, or skipping around with no pattern. God makes no rules here; you know better than a distant shepherd how to feed your flock. Still, a uniform plan, like preaching one of those three lessons through a season or more, may be beneficial. Your congregation may appreciate the consistency.

Rotating weekly also doesn't necessarily solve the challenge of keeping the various Sundays of End Time and Advent distinct. Preaching the First Lesson in End Time, and the Gospels in Advent, or vice-versa, etc., should help.

2) Follow the KISS principle.<sup>4</sup> In your preaching planning, follow the names of the Sundays.<sup>5</sup>

Take Last Judgment Sunday seriously, then. Sing *Day of Wrath, Oh, Day of Mourning* (CW 209) and/or *The Day Is Surely Drawing Near* (CW 207). In your sermon stress the last judgment itself and its results.

Saints Triumphant Sunday, by contrast, will be more joyful. Sing *Jerusalem the Golden* (CW 214/ CWS 728), *There Is a Higher Throne* (CWS 727), and/or *For All the Saints* (CW 551), the hymn which gives the Sunday its name. Proclaim the future bliss which seeing God will provide.

Keep Christ the King Sunday more about Christ's eternal reign than about us and our joys. Sing *May the Peace of God* (CWS 745), *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name* (CW 370) and/or *Crown Him with Many Crowns* (CW 341). As you preach, glorify the King of kings for all he is and does.

Advent 1 has Gospel lessons each year which focus on the signs of Christ's imminent return. Emphasize these signs, and constant readiness, in your sermon. Besides obvious hymn choices, such as *The Advent of Our King* (CW 1), consider *The Night Will Soon Be Ending*, (CWS 705). Accent soon.

In Advent 2 and 3, proclaim John the Baptist's call to repent and trust in the Lamb alone. Advent 1 highlights the signs of Jesus' return; let Advent 2 and 3 be more about the urgency of our response to John's call.

3) Consult the revised *Planning Christian Worship*. Year C is available in the "worship" section of [connect.wels.net](http://connect.wels.net).

4) Visualize several of your sheep who aren't in God's house every Sunday in End Time or Advent. (Sinful habits? Poor health?) Don't forget them, as you plan your preaching. You may feel you're being repetitive. They won't.

Daniel Witte

<sup>1</sup> In the TLH lectionary the next year with all 27 Sundays after Trinity finally allowing one to preach on the wise and foolish virgins: 2035.

<sup>2</sup> The Gospels least likely to be preached now are Pentecost 24 A, B, and C:

A) Matthew 25:14-30 (Parable of the Talents),

B) Mark 12:28-34 (The Greatest Commandment – but we read its parallel in Matthew on Pentecost 23A), and

C) Luke 19:1-10 (Zacchaeus).

Remember A and C when in need of a free text, since they come up so rarely.

Also, consider altering the year A End Time Gospels in an upcoming year – both for variety, as well as a fitting sermon series of parables over the four weeks:

Reformation	Mt 10:16-23	Persecuted Preachers
Last Judgment	Mt 25:31-46	King, Sheep and Goats
Saints Triumphant	Mt 25:1-13	Wise and Foolish Virgins
Christ the King	Mt 27:17-31	Hail, King of the Jews

Possible Alternate:

Reformation	Mt 24:45-51	The Two Servants
Last Judgment	Mt 25:1-13	Wise and Foolish Virgins
Saints Triumphant	Mt 25:14-30	Talents
Christ the King	Mt 25:31-46	King, Sheep and Goats

<sup>3</sup> What about the Palm Sunday Gospel on Advent 1? That ancient custom makes Advent 1's content quite different from other nearby Sundays. The LC-MS has gone this way in its latest hymnal, *Lutheran Service Book*. CW's plan may be better: read the Palm Sunday Gospel on Palm Sunday. Compared to the Palm Sunday texts, the CW/CWS Gospels for Advent 1 make it easier to preach on signs of the last days and on staying ready for Jesus' reappearing.

<sup>4</sup> "Keep it simple and stupid," said Kelly Johnson, an engineer for Lockheed, who wanted to make sure that military jets could be fixed by average mechanics in the field, under combat conditions. (See how this applies to Christ's ambassadors?)

<sup>5</sup> Admittedly, this approach doesn't solve all preaching overlap dilemmas. For instance, the only significant Gospel change in End Time or Advent Sundays is for Last Judgment and Saints Triumphant in Year B.

CW: LJ: John 5:19-24 ST: John 5:25-29

CWS: LJ: John 5:19-30 ST: Mark 13:24-27

You could argue that while the switch keeps more of the last judgment on Last Judgment Sunday, neither Gospel above for Saints Triumphant contains details about the saints' triumph. Remember, with caution: Jesus didn't send you to "preach the text." Your commission: "Preach the gospel." Never use a text as a pretext, but for Jesus' glory and your flock's good you can highlight certain aspects in a text over others. Above all: "Preach the gospel."



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