

# PREACH

the Word

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## What One Year of Preaching Taught Me



When I was asked to write an article for *Preach the Word*, my first thought was, "What could I possibly write that would be helpful to men who have been preaching for so many years?" As I thought about it, I realized that the purpose of the article is not to give brilliant insights drawn from a massive storehouse of experience. The purpose is simple: share the experiences and observations of a man who has been preaching for one year. So, here it is.

I suppose my greatest fear when I left the seminary was that I wouldn't have anything left to say after preaching for a few months. Surprisingly, I have found the opposite to be true. I have so much to say every week that I wish I had time for two sermons. I believe the reason for this change is that I am finally beginning to learn what the seminary professors were saying when they told us to "preach the text." They didn't tell us to preach about the text. They told us to preach the text. There is a tremendous difference between the two.

As I studied sermon texts at the seminary, I was very concerned about discovering the main point the text was making. Once I discovered that main point, however, I usually stopped preaching the text, and I began

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## Preacher to Preacher

While serving as chairman of the Commission on Worship, pastors would occasionally ask me what I thought of children's sermons. Several were quite surprised when I told them that I was not enthusiastic about including them as part of corporate worship.

Recently I came across an insightful article on this subject, written by Carl Schalk, and included in his small volume of "reflections on worship, liturgy, and children" titled *First Person Singular* (Morning Star, 1998). Prof. Schalk suggests several reasons why children's sermons may not be such a good idea.

Too often children's sermons cross the line between what was intended and what they turned out to be: entertainment. People like to be entertained, and children can be very entertaining. But that is hardly the purpose of corporate worship.

Children's sermons have the worthy goal of seeking to involve this segment of the congregation in meaningful worship. Schalk wonders: "But does it—really?" Highlighting one place in worship "for children" suggests that the rest

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of the service is somehow irrelevant for them. Is that the message we want to be sending?

Schalk asks if "children's sermons place the focus where it belongs?" Congregation members often seem to be more interested in whether a child will blurt out some unexpected or humorous answer than in what the leader is attempting to teach.

Finally there is the problem of settling for "another gospel." Children's sermons easily slip into what Schalk calls a "casual moralizing: Will Jesus like us if we do this or that?"

There are more appropriate ways of involving children in corporate worship. The preacher can make a conscious effort to speak directly to the children in his sermons. If parts of the service are sung and spoken in Sunday schools and Lutheran elementary schools, even small children will learn to participate. Giving children a part in a responsive prayer or reading tells them that they are partners in worship. Children might from time to time be asked to sing a stanza of a familiar hymn after rehearsing it. You might have other suggestions.

We certainly want to include children in corporate worship. But having children's sermons may not be the best way to accomplish this.

preaching about the text. For example, if the text was about objective justification, I would launch into a long discourse on everything I had learned about objective justification rather than what this text said about objective justification.

This means that a thorough text study is essential. The Holy Spirit used a variety of styles and words and phrases in the Bible. These are what make a sermon text come alive. And, in turn, these are what make a sermon come alive and make it unique.

Generally, the more effort I put into the study of a text, the easier it is to preach the text. The more time I spend with my nose in the text, the less time I spend with my feet on the desk trying to think of an illustration or application. The best illustrations and applications come from the words and phrases of the text itself. I will spend the rest of my ministry trying to become better at preaching the text. It is the only way I know to preach the same message of law and gospel every week while remaining fresh and interesting.

As I flip through the channels on television  
or stations on the radio, I hear all sorts of preachers.  
I hear an awful lot of "What Would Jesus Do"  
and precious little "What Did Jesus Do."

My first year in the ministry has given me a greater appreciation for the importance of preaching law and gospel clearly in every sermon. I am sometimes disappointed when members comment on a sermon, and it seems all they heard was the law. This even happens when I think I have preached the gospel as clearly as possible. It reminds me that the devil works overtime to keep us from the peace and freedom of the gospel. It also reminds me of the importance of preaching the gospel over and over again because sinful souls need the salve of the gospel applied on a daily basis.

Finally, my first year in the ministry has made me thankful that God has chosen me to be a preacher. I am thankful that God has chosen me to be a Lutheran preacher. As I flip through the channels on television or stations on the radio, I hear all sorts of preachers. I hear an awful lot of "What Would Jesus Do" and precious little "What Did Jesus Do." While the former is important, it is worthless without the latter. I'm thankful that God has given me a message of peace and comfort in his Word. And I'm thankful for the privilege of sharing it.

Well, that's it. I pray that these thoughts might be a blessing to you. If it is not instructive, perhaps it will at least stir up memories of when you were starting your sophomore season in the ministry. May God's Holy Spirit bless all of our efforts to Preach the Word!

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" Q u o t i n g "

Dr. C.F.W. Walther calls preaching the most important task of a minister and adds that it is "also the most difficult function assigned to a minister of the church." He is critical of "ministers who imagine that preaching is easy to them, and the longer they are in the ministry, the easier preaching becomes to them; for they reason that, if they are only careful to preach nothing but the pure Word of God, without any admixture of heresy, that must be sufficient. Such preachers are laboring under a great, an awful, a very pernicious error. A mere pious talk without aim and logical order is not real preaching. Genuine preaching is inspired only by the Holy Ghost through his word. Accordingly, a real sermon is produced only after all the spiritual and intellectual energy of a truly believing preacher has been exerted to the utmost, after fervent prayer, after all earthly cares have been chased from the mind, and after the preacher has been freed from all vain desires. That is a difficult task." (*The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, pp.247f)

Walther's words should not put us on a guilt trip but rather be an encouragement to continue to work hard at improving our preaching. One way to improve preaching, according to John Wesley, is to read, read, read. The *Lutheran Cyclopedia* reports that Wesley "is supposed to have traveled over 200,000 miles and to have preached over 40,000 times (two to four times daily)." One wonders how he had any time for reading.

Yet Wesley shamed John Premboth for his failure to do more reading: "What has exceedingly hurt you in time past, nay, and I fear, to this day, is want of reading. I scarce ever knew a preacher read so little. And perhaps, by neglecting it, have lost the taste for it. Hence your talent in preaching does not increase. It is just the same as it was seven years ago. It is lively, but not deep; there is little variety; there is no compass of thought. Reading only can supply this, with meditation and daily prayer. You wrong yourself greatly by omitting this. You can never be a deep preacher without it, any more than a thorough Christian. O begin! Fix some part of every day for private exercise. You may acquire the taste which you have not: what is tedious at first will afterward be pleasant. Whether you like it or no, read and pray daily. It is for your life; there is no other way; else you will be a trifler all your days, and a pretty superficial preacher. Do justice to your own soul; give it time and means to grow. Do not starve yourself any longer. Take up your cross and be a Christian altogether. Then will all the children of God rejoice (not grieve) over you." (letter, August 17, 1760)

Walther and Wesley took the task of preaching very seriously. Shall we do any less?

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## PALM/PASSION SUNDAY

The NPH Lenten packet for 2000 will include suggestions for a Palm Sunday procession. This form (subject to revision) will be included in the forthcoming *Book of Occasional Services*.

Since only a minority of our members attend midweek Lenten services, consider this dual emphasis: Palm and Passion Sunday. Here's a rough outline:

- Procession - Follow the NPH packet form, or with a choir of children or adults carrying palm branches. If the NPH material is not used, read the Palm Sunday account (Year B,

Mark 11:1-10) near the beginning of the service.

- Readings - The Passion History (Mark 14:1 - 15:47 or Mark 15:1-39) may be read alone, or use all readings. For Year B, also Zechariah 9:9-10 and Philippians 2:5-11.

- Sermon - Length depends on other service elements. Short is fine alongside the clear law and gospel of St. Mark's Passion History. Preaching can go either direction, Palm Sunday or Passion themes (but not yet Good Friday). A Palm Sunday sermon could precede the reading of the Passion History.

- Communion - As Christ came to the city of Jerusalem, so he comes to us today.

Too much repetition if the passion history is read on Palm Sunday? Hardly! Jesus' suffering and atoning death are central to our faith and life. Even a worshiper who attends all midweek and holy week services need not find this emphasis overdone.

Planning for a procession needs to be done well in advance. For more ideas, see: [www.wels.net/sab/frm-cow.html](http://www.wels.net/sab/frm-cow.html)

Bryan Gerlach

## Preaching Preview

The attention of a preacher in the season between Christmas and Lent is often focused on things like annual reports, meetings local and synodical, and on neglected assignments.

Sermon preparation may be short-changed. We've put a lot of effort into Advent-Christmas preaching, and we might relax knowing that Lent will soon be upon us.

The good news this year is that Easter won't be celebrated till April 23 (the latest date for Easter listed in our hymnal is April 25 in 2038). Ash Wednesday is not till March 8. That gives preachers two full months before many of them will need to prepare two sermons a week.

But long-range planning for Lent should be done now. Where there is pulpit sharing, a schedule must be set up. Decisions need to be made on a sermon series. Many preachers will use a series put out by NPH or some other publisher. Some will work out their own Lenten series.

I found it rather exciting to plan a special series of Lenten sermons. I remember one year preaching a series titled "Portraits of Sinners in Parables." All the parables were from Luke, and I encouraged the members of the congregation to read through all of Luke during Lent. (We provided individual copies of Luke's Gospel.)

Can you name the parable on which the following sermon topics were based? "Two Loveless Clergymen." "Busy People with Wrong Priorities." "The Jealous Brother." "A Good Man Ruined by Pride." "The Timid Servant Who Made Excuses." "A Gang of Killers."

These sermons portrayed a variety of sinners. But more importantly, they also proclaimed the sinners' substitute. It's a special privilege to preach sin and grace during the season of Lent. Seize the moment.

While on the subject of the Lenten season, it might be well to raise the question as to whether you will use the propers for Ash Wednesday (CW Manual, p. 403) or regard this day simply as one of six midweek services. *The Book of Occasional Services* (CW:OS) will include the passion history divided into five sections. This suggests that on Ash Wednesday the readings for that day be used. As an alternate to reading the traditional passion history, CW:OS will include suggested verse divisions for reading one of the three synoptic Gospels in five sections. The divisions for Mark (Year B) are: 14:12-26; 14:27-42; 14:43-65; 14:66-15:15; 15:16-39. A service for the imposition of ashes will also be included in CW:OS. More information is provided at [www.wels.net/sab/frm-cow.html](http://www.wels.net/sab/frm-cow.html) under Occasional Services: Lent.

That's enough about Lent. Back to the Sundays which fall in January and February: Christmas 2 through Epiphany 8. The late date for Easter means that all the Sundays after the Epiphany will be used this year. We don't often get to the Seventh and Eighth Sundays after the Epiphany.

This year affords a wonderful opportunity to plunge into the opening

chapters of Mark's Gospel. There are seven readings from Mark in these two months, all from chapters one and two. These are key stories from Christ's early ministry: baptism, call of the first disciples, healing on the Sabbath, healing and teaching in Capernaum, healing of a leper, the paralytic healed spiritually and physically, and conflict with the Pharisees.

If you do preach on Mark, be aware that a number of these texts describe healings. You'll have to approach each text individually and seek out the special point which the Spirit is making. A common theme in all these stories from Mark is "epiphany." Jesus Christ, the babe born in a manger, is revealed as the eternal Son of God. Making this point throughout the Epiphany season will help prepare for the sermons of Lent.

How many WELS congregations schedule a special service on January 6, the Festival of the Epiphany of our Lord? This year the festival falls on a Thursday evening. The world (and our members) will for the most part have forgotten all about Christmas by January 6. What better way to close out the celebration of our Lord's nativity than to focus on the Magi and their worship of the newborn King! The service might also include Holy Communion, the visible sign of his continuing presence which our Lord has given us 21st century Christians. If there is not time to plan an Epiphany service this year, give thought to including it on your calendar for next year.

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