

# PREACH

*the Word*

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## Personal Steps to Preaching Enrichment

What can you do to improve your preaching? Without downplaying the benefits of a summer quarter class at the seminary or the helpfulness of a brother's encouragement, there are opportunities to enrich your preaching in the quiet of your study.

### 1. Preach to a congregation of one.

The pressures of preaching blind us to the truth that the first heart for our sermon to reach is our own. Often the first question on our minds is, "What can I say for 15-20 minutes on this text?" How much better to study with this question in mind: "What is the Holy Spirit saying to me in this text?" When God's scalpel has bloodied us first, then we can preach the law without pharisaical pride. When the gospel has bound up our wounds, then with genuine enthusiasm we are ready to proclaim the good news.

### 2. Trust that the harvest is assured.

Do you wonder if preaching accomplishes anything? We preach about vital issues of faith and life, and yet there seems to be so little change in God's people. Almost imperceptibly, we lose confidence that our preaching is doing any good. Remember what you know well: the word you speak is living and active and will produce a harvest. You are not only proclaiming news of victory already won in Christ, but also through your words, God is winning daily victories in hearts. Your Savior has privileged you to help your hearers find their places in the victory march heavenward.

### 3. Pray without ceasing.

When we fail to pray, aren't we harboring insidious pride that says, "It really does all depend on my desire, skill, and effort?" We know such thinking is arrogance. God alone works in us to will and to act according to his good purpose. Therefore preaching begins, continues, and ends with prayer for God's blessing. Like Jacob at Peniel, take hold of God and refuse to let go until he blesses you. Begin by praying that he give you his Holy Spirit. As you study, keep on praying: "Lord, open my eyes that



## Preacher to Preacher

Many church members only see and hear the preacher on Sunday mornings. They will likely judge him on his pulpit performance. But the preacher's family is different. They will see him in quite a different light. They will have a much clearer picture of his strengths and weaknesses.

This came vividly to mind by two recent items I read. The first, a profile of the famous movie director Ingmar Bergman, appeared in *The New Yorker*. Bergman grew up in Stockholm where his father was pastor of Hedveg Eleanora Church. The canopied gilt baroque pulpit there is 30 feet above the pews. The elder Bergman was tall and handsome, and his son never dared go to sleep when his father was preaching. "It was some sort of theater . . . My father was a marvelous actor."

But Bergman recalls that at home, during the week, it was a different story. He calls his father a "lamentable terrified wretch" full of "compressed hatred." "Offstage he was nervous, irritable, and depressive; he worried about being inadequate, he agonized over his public appearances . . . always

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fretting and given to violent outbursts." Bergman never forgot the "sermons" his father preached at home.

Herbert Brokering also grew up in a parsonage. In his recent book *Love, Dad—Letters of Faith to My Children*, he describes quite a different kind of preacher-father. "Father taught me the mind of God, he helped me learn by heart good psalms and scripture verses. He helped me study God's love and grace and faith and taught me healing stories."

At the same time Brokering had a sense of awe, almost a fear, of his father. He recalls his father's sermon preparation: "Father studied many hours to write well and to say well what he would preach. While we were playing downstairs, I heard his feet stomping on the upstairs floor in our country parsonage. Then we stopped laughing and playing. We grew quiet. We colored and drew pictures with mother."

Preaching on Sunday mornings and at other times during the week does demand our best. But we are more than preachers to a congregation. We are first of all preachers to ourselves. And we are preachers to our families. May the words they hear on Sunday be reflected in our actions all week long.

I may see wonderful things in your word." After the "Amen" is spoken, pray that the seed take root and bear fruit as he has promised.

#### 4. Take your time.

Often our sermon work is rushed. The demands of the telephone, putting out parish fires, and administration consume our week. We vainly try to convince ourselves that we work better under pressure

as Sunday relentlessly approaches. Remind yourself (and your leaders) that preaching reaches more people than any other avenue of ministry. As the *Apology* states, "Nothing attaches people to the church as does good preaching (Article XXIV)." Prioritize ministry activities and block out hours early in the week for thorough exegesis and careful sermon preparation.

#### 5. Don't neglect your devotional life.

When God's Word is not daily confronting and comforting us, we will be dying of thirst while urging our people to drink deeply from the water of life. We grow as we study for sermons and classes. But nothing can fully replace time spent in the Word for no other purpose than that our dear heavenly Father addresses us personally as his dear children.

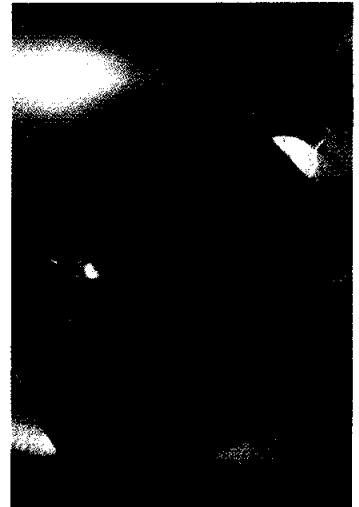
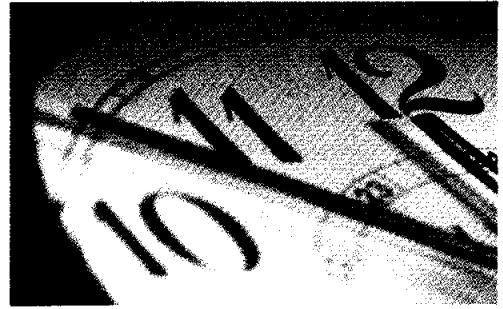
#### 6. Smile! You're on candid camera.

It may sound mundane, but occasionally watching your sermons on videotape is helpful. We may convince ourselves that what we don't know won't hurt us. But what we don't know may be hurting God's people. Nervous habits of voice and body, picked up in our early self-conscious years, may be obscuring the cross from sight. If we expect our people to listen to us week after week, shouldn't we listen to ourselves?

#### 7. Read more than this newsletter.

When was the last time you reviewed your homiletics textbook? Such rereading will awaken us to where we've grown careless as well as further sharpen areas of strength. When was the last time you read Walther's *Law and Gospel*? Why not set an annual goal of reading one book on preaching, either classic or current?

God's blessings, Brothers, as you continually strive for better preaching. God will bless you and will make you a blessing to many!



Richard Gurgel

Professor Gurgel serves at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

## “Quoting”

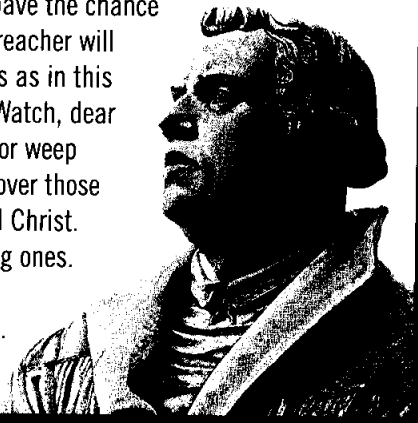
One of the personal steps to preaching enrichment that Prof. Richard Gurgel lists is “Pray Without Ceasing!” Here are several suggestions as to how a preacher can carry this out in practice:

Martin Luther in his table talk suggests the very words which a preacher might speak: “When you are going to preach, first speak to God and say, ‘Dear Lord, I would preach for your honor, I would speak of you, praise you, and glorify your name. Though I cannot do it well, you make it good.’ Don’t think of Philip (Melancthon), Bugenhagen, me, or any other learned man, but consider that you are the most learned of all when you speak from the pulpit. I have never been troubled because I cannot preach well, but I have often been afraid and awed to think that I have to preach before God’s face of his great majesty and divine being. Therefore only be strong and pray.”

George Herbert (1593-1633) was an Anglican cleric who served in the parish only a brief three years before he met an early death. But they were productive years, during which he completed a little booklet of what we might call pastoral theology titled “The Country Parson.” Included in that booklet is Herbert’s own prayer before preaching. Here is a slightly revised version of that prayer:

“Blessed be the God of heaven and earth who only does wondrous things! Awake, my lute and my viol; awake all my powers to glorify you. Lo, we stand here, beseeching you to bless your word wherever spoken this day through the universal Church. Oh, make it a word of power and peace to convert those who are not yet yours and to confirm those that are. Especially, bless this portion of your people here assembled together, with your unworthy servant speaking to them. Lord Jesus, teach me that I may teach them; sanctify and enable all my powers that in their full strength they may deliver your message reverently, readily, faithfully, and fruitfully. Oh, make your word a swift word, passing from the ear to the heart, from the heart to the life and conversation, that as the rain returns not empty, so neither may your word, but accomplish that for which it is given. Oh Lord hear; oh Lord forgive; oh Lord, hearken, and do so for your blessed Son’s sake. Amen.”

A marvelous collection of prayers and readings is found in *The Minister’s Prayer Book* edited by John W. Doberstein. This volume may no longer be in print, but if you have the chance to pick it up somewhere, do so. The preacher will pray not only for himself but for others as in this prayer on Saturday evening (p. 44): “Watch, dear Lord, with those who wake, or watch, or weep tonight, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend your sick ones, O Lord Christ. Rest your weary ones. Bless your dying ones. Soothe your suffering ones. Pity your afflicted ones. Shield your joyous ones. And all, for your love’s sake. Amen.”



## CW:Altar Book

One finds sermon idea seeds in many places. An overlooked source might be the prayers planned for worship. Well-written prayers yield useful and memorable turns of phrase. Consider, for example, this sentence from “Morning Devotion” (CW p.152): “Better than life is your love.” Those words could serve as a powerful refrain in a sermon for Saints Triumphant (November 14 this year) or a funeral.

Another example: “Set our hearts on fire as we work and witness for Christ” (Mission of the Church, CW p.129). Those words will jump off the page when people pray them after hearing those same words several times in a sermon.

Later this year Northwestern Publishing House will release another book to complement our hymnal. *Christian Worship: Altar Book* will contain 62 Prayers of the Church (about half of them responsive) and 92 other prayers. As preachers plan sermons, prayer phrases can suggest ideas, themes, emphases, and applications. Here’s an example from the new *Altar Book*: “Lord of Eternity and King of Saints, all the heavens adore you” (responsive prayer for Saints Triumphant).

The Commission on Worship offers this *Altar Book* to WELS not only to supply a variety of special prayers, but also as another stimulus to enrich preaching.

Bryan Gerlach

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## Preaching Preview

Awesome, isn't it, to be preaching the Word of God during the last two months of the second millennium!

Three Sundays in November focus on the end: Last Judgment, Saints Triumphant, and Christ the King. There will be a special poignancy about preaching end-time sermons when the world's clock is about to turn over to the year 2,000. Doing everything possible to make sure that computers function properly in the new millennium has been a #1 priority. People may be computer ready for a new year, but unfortunately many are not ready for the eternal millennium. As preachers it's our task to help our hearers get ready spiritually for the dawn of that new age.

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On Nov. 28 the church will turn over its calendar to a new year on the First Sunday in Advent. When I was active in the parish ministry that always meant embarking on a different series of sermon texts. Almost without exception, I followed a regular program of preaching for an entire year on either the First or Second Lessons or the Gospel. I worked out a nine year schedule beginning in Advent that went like this:

- 1999—Second Lesson
- 2000—Gospel (Luke)
- 2001—First Lesson
- 2002—Gospel (Matthew)
- 2003—First Lesson
- 2004—Second Lesson
- 2005—First Lesson
- 2006—Second Lesson
- 2007—Gospel (Mark)

While on the subject of the lessons and Gospel, I have noticed that not a few preachers refer to these three as the Old Testament Lesson, Epistle Lesson, and Gospel Lesson. I think it would be better to use the terminology found in CW because the First Lesson is not always from the Old Testament, the Second Lesson is not always from an epistle (a word becoming obscure for many), and to refer to the Gospel as a lesson detracts from its very special significance: this is the holy gospel of our Lord which directly unfolds for us his saving ministry.

During the season of Advent many congregations have adopted the practice of lighting the four candles of the wreath. This may be done in place of the Song of Praise, which can be omitted during Advent. Before the candle is lit, there might be a brief dialog between the minister and people. If you are interested in a form I have used, I'll be happy to e-mail you a copy <vhprucson@aol.com>.

A couple other things about Advent: if your church doesn't have blue paraments for this season, work toward purchasing some. Blue instead of purple serves to set off this time of hope as we wait for the light (white) of Christmas.

As much as possible, try to keep Christmas out of Advent. I know that's hard to do. But celebrating the Festival of the Nativity of our Lord is so much fresher and more joyful when we haven't jumped the gun in

Advent. Let Advent be a time of waiting. And then when Christmas comes, pull out all the stops!

All the stops doesn't just mean organ stops and special music. All the stops means being served the full banquet of Word and Sacrament: festive preaching and Holy Communion. Just as the Word became flesh in the womb of the virgin and lived among the people of his day, so in love and mercy he continues to come to us in Word and Sacrament. In, with, and under the bread and wine, we receive the body and blood of Christ, that same body and blood born for our salvation in Bethlehem. Pull out all the stops as you celebrate the Nativity of our Lord.

Notice: Christmas Day falls on Saturday this year. The next day is Sunday. Another sermon suggestion: observe the Minor Festival which falls on December 26th: St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr. Use the Second Lesson (Acts 6:8-7:2a, 51-60) as your text. You will have plenty of material for a good sermon.

A possible theme: "Christmas Brings Peace to the Dying Believer." The martyrdom of Stephen is a grim reminder that just because we're in the Christmas season, people don't stop dying. If you have Bach's Cantata 57, which he wrote for this festival, you'll get some sermon thoughts.

A new millennium is coming. So is Christ. Help your people to be ready.

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