

PREACH

the Word

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Homiletic Review for Seniors

Seminary students returning from their year of vicaring have a final classroom opportunity to hone their homiletical skills before graduation. What is stressed in the senior sermon year builds on the principles of preaching learned in the first two years at seminary. Homiletic review is not only beneficial for seminary seniors; it will also benefit the more senior preachers who desire to improve their skills in proclaiming the Word of God.

Preaching the Word is not to present a blueprint for successful living. It is not manipulating people. It is not being a stand up comic or a raconteur, although story and humor and an occasional flash of wit do have a place in preaching. It means to preach God's law. Above all, and this sets the Lutheran sermon apart from all other religious teaching, it proclaims the good news of what God has done to rescue sinners through Jesus Christ.

The question to ask as you begin to study the text is not, "What can I make of this?" but, "What is God saying here?" After thorough study and careful consideration of the Propers, consider shortening the text. The theory here is that a little less exposition will permit more practical observation, illustration (especially story), appropriation, and application—and thus more interest.

As you discover the logical divisions of the text, formulate the theme, and go about organizing the material at hand. Keep in mind that the theme will be (at least implicitly) a statement; that is, there will be a subject and a predicate. As you outline the sermon, remember that it is to elaborate that statement, defend it, illustrate it, and make it practical.

Sermon preparation is not so much a matter of deciding what to do as it is discovering what you must do. In the text give special attention to particles



Preacher to Preacher

Before a commercial airliner loaded with passengers takes off, the pilot and co-pilot go through a lengthy check list to make sure everything is in order. They want to do everything possible to insure a safe flight.

There's value in the preacher doing the same thing as one of the final touches in sermon preparation. Not everyone will agree what items might be included on such a list, but I check my sermons for six ingredients:

#1 - Law. "Through the law we become conscious of sin." What will I say which makes my hearers conscious of having fallen short of what God expects? Have I missed something in the text which uncovers sin?

#2 - Gospel. Walther's final theses: "the Gospel must predominate in the preaching of a Christian minister." Is this generally true of my preaching? Has Christ and his righteousness been clearly proclaimed in this sermon?

#3 - Propers and Hymns. The sermon is only one component in worship. Make connections with other parts of the service. Look for illustrations suggested by the

Continued on page 2

Continued on page 2

Continued from page 1



readings. Check for thoughts in the hymns as application.

#4 - Baptism. Luther preached five series of sermons on this Sacrament in the years between 1528 and 1539. Are my hearers conscious of what baptism means for them today? Is there a place in this sermon to link Baptism to Christian faith and life?

#5 - Holy Communion.

AC X: "It is taught among us that the true body and blood of Christ are really present in the Supper of our Lord under the form of bread and wine and are there distributed and received. The contrary doctrine is therefore rejected." Do our sermons give evidence of this teaching? Is there opportunity in this sermon to apply the comfort of this Sacrament?

#6 - Children and Teens. The temptation for us is to prepare sermons with only adults in mind. Look for opportunities to use examples from the life of children and teenagers. Does this sermon have an application directed specifically to children or teenagers?

Obviously a preacher can't give equal emphasis to all these items in every sermon. But going over this checklist helped me keep focused on what I consider important in preaching.

(because, therefore, but, both...and, in order that, with the result that). Very often they signal what the main thought and the secondary thoughts of the sermon ought to be.

Formulate the theme in words which make clear that the message is "for you and me, here and now." Bible history and exegesis become a sermon when we make clear, "As then, so now. As they, so we."

If the introduction occurs to you before you have a theme, it will probably not be an appropriate introduction. More likely, the text contains the germ of what will be your introduction. Remember that the introduction leads into the sermon and that the shortest distance between "Fellow redeemed" and the theme is a straight line.

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Try to write a conclusion for which "Amen" can be more than a signal that the sermon is over. That is, remember that "Amen" means "This is most certainly true." That suggests a gospel statement for the last sentence, doesn't it?

A few words on the content and style of the sermon. Thorough and deliberate text study in the original languages is the most reliable way to assure solid content and fresh style in preaching. Describing sanctification or defining the doctrine is not preaching sanctification. Explicit instruction on how God wants us to live needs to be based on the gospel as the source of such living. The imperatives and exhortations of the law in its third use must be based on the gospel indicatives that motivate and enable.

Any artificiality in the use of language may arouse the suspicion that the message, or at least the preacher, is not authentic. Also, are you sure that you know the origins, meaning, and popular usage of colloquialisms you might want to use?

Many a good sermon has been spoiled by a weak delivery. Leaving aside the importance of committing the sermon to memory so that we can deliver it fluently while we maintain eye contact with the congregation, let us remember that the exposition of the text begins with the reading of the text. Read for meaning. Avoid false emphases, especially on prepositions! Avoid over-dramatizing. Let the Word of God provide its own exclamation points.

Above all, remember that the worshipers have come to see and hear Jesus, and you are only his spokesman.

Richard Balge
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w o r t h
 “Quoting”

Sometimes disappointed because the Word does not seem to get immediate results? Consider Luther's comments on Christ's parable (Matthew 13:33) about the leaven: [The yeast] does not leaven the whole lump at once but gently, and gradually we become like this new leaven, and eventually a bread of God. This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal, but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.” (LW 32:24)

Some years ago the Reformation scholar Roland Bainton edited a booklet titled “The Martin Luther Easter Book” with selections from Luther's writings divided into five parts: Journey to Jerusalem, the Lord's Supper, Arrest and Trial, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection. In the section on the Lord's Supper, Luther has some encouragement for church members who stay away from the Sacrament because they do not feel worthy. He urged such persons to look to Christ's mouth and not to their own hands. “Remind yourself”, Luther says, “that I do not come in my own righteousness. In that case I would never come. A child is not baptized because it is godly, and I do not go to confession because I am pure. I go as one who is unworthy, who cannot be worthy. God preserve me from being worthy.” Then Luther observes: “We are always looking at our hands rather than at Christ's mouth. We ought to say, ‘I see what thou sayest, not what I do.’” (WA 29,209-210)

Throughout these selections Luther emphasizes the importance of preaching with special stress on the resurrection (and not only on Easter Sunday). He writes: “The article of the resurrection is the most important but the most difficult to believe. The others are hard, but this exceeds them all because no article so contradicts experience as does this, for we see how all men die and how bodies are mutilated. Some are devoured by wild beasts; one man leaves a leg behind in Hungary, another is burned, another drowned, and yet we are to believe that the members will be reassembled and we shall have the same bodies, the same eyes, and so on, although in altered form. When reason considers this article, it simply lets it go. That is why we have to have the Scripture for it.

“I have found from experience that the devil can undo me the more easily when I am not armored with the Word. He has brought me to the point where I do not know if there is a God or a Christ, and has taken from me what otherwise I know for certain. That is what happens if the heart is without the Word and faith.” (WA 32,58)



OCCASIONAL SERVICES UPDATE

In February the committee producing *Christian Worship: Occasional Services* held its twentieth meeting. Later in the year they hope to turn over manuscripts to NPH for publication.

The Word of God does not come to us in public worship only in preaching. It comes also in the ordinary and proper of services as well as occasional services such as confirmations, installations, and funerals. This book of occasional services will preach the Word in its own way.

Critical review and field testing by parishes and pastors has helped the CW:OS committee with its work. Presently the committee is seeking pastors to field test the rites of

Holy Baptism II and/or Confirmation. Current versions of these services are revised from the versions available earlier at the Commission on Worship website.

Baptism II may replace Holy Baptism [I] from CW or may be used for a private baptism. It includes the Creed, a fine version of Luther's *Sintflugebet* (Flood Prayer), an option for sponsors, and options for a baptismal candle and/or white baptismal garment. The Confirmation rite is crafted to serve adult and youth confirmations.

The CW:OS committee also welcomes field testers who will use the following services “as is” so the

committee can gain clear feedback on the final forms of these services. Revised from earlier versions are:

- Palm Sunday-Procession of Palms
- Service of Darkness (Good Friday: Tenebrae)
- Easter Vigil (this can be an Easter Dawn service, beginning in darkness)

Pastors willing to do field testing should contact the Commission on Worship office <worship@sab.wels.net> Twenty-five different services, along with some of their explanatory documents, are currently available on the website: www.wels.net/sab/frm-cow.html

Bryan Gerlach

Preaching Preview

It was Easter Sunday evening 1959. I was sitting in the study of a Northwestern College professor visiting about a variety of things. The subject of preaching two sermons a week during the Lenten season came up. I had to confess that as a rookie preacher, preparing all those sermons had exhausted me, physically and spiritually. But I added, "What really helped me through it all was listening to Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. I discovered that to be a tremendous spiritual resource."

The professor seemed mildly surprised that I found strength in music for sermon preparation. And I'm sure that not everyone will enjoy listening to something like the *St. Matthew Passion* as I did. But I'd like to suggest that listening to music can be a fine way to prepare for Lenten preaching and to receive spiritual nourishment along the way.

It's no secret that Luther placed a high value on music ("next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise"). He linked music to his own preaching: "Music is God's greatest gift. It has often so stimulated and stirred me that I felt the desire to preach" (*What Luther Says*, p. 982).

Luther's high evaluation of music was not shared by Zwingli and Calvin.

Calvin permitted only the singing of Psalms in worship. He could not shake off a fear of the power of music and its potential spiritual harm. Luther's more positive attitude opened the path which led to the heights attained by Bach.

To preview Lenten preaching, one could hardly find anything more appropriate than Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. Here is the Word of God, the history of our Lord's suffering and

Bach

ANNIVERSARY

1750-2000



death, encased in marvelous music. Here is the entire text of Matthew 26 and 27 dramatically narrated along with homiletical commentary and prayer, interspersed with sixteen superb Lutheran hymn stanzas.

Presenting the history of our Lord's suffering and death in music on Good Friday was a common practice in central Germany at that time. Bach was responsible for preparing special music on Sundays and festivals for the Lutheran churches in Leipzig. It seems that he toiled for several years in crafting his *St. Matthew Passion* used at Good Friday worship in 1727. Three years earlier his *St. John Passion* was sung on Good Friday.

One of the sources which Bach may have used for some portions of his work was a series of eight Passion sermons preached by the Rostock theologian Heinrich Müller. Bach owned a copy of Müller's sermons. If this was the case, then these sermons inspired Bach to preach his own sermon. His is Lenten preaching in a unique form. It is preaching for the preacher from the heart of a devout Lutheran Christian.

The center of Bach's Gospel message is expressed in the words sung just before Pilate sentenced Jesus to death

(Matthew 27:23-26): "Out of love my Savior will die though he knows nothing of sin so that the eternal destruction and punishment of judgment may not rest on my soul." This is the message we will be proclaiming in our Lenten sermons.

A good starting point for the first time listener of Bach's Passion would be the somber presentation of Jesus' death on the cross and the dramatic acts which follow: the veil of the temple torn, an earthquake, the resurrection of the saints (Matthew 27:45-54). Punctuating this narrative, the ninth stanza (German) of "O Sacred Head Now Wounded" is sung. A believer cannot listen to these words without being deeply moved.

Many fine CD recordings of the *St. Matthew Passion* are available. It's all in German, of course. But especially the basic text is so familiar that even a person with a meager German vocabulary will have no problem following.

Listening to the *St. Matthew Passion* with text in hand can have several benefits for the preacher. It forces one to really listen to what is being said. The sung text of Matthew is every bit as much the Word of God as the spoken text. Hearing the words in a foreign language will often give insights and thoughts for preaching which one might miss reading the familiar English words.

There is also spiritual nourishment for the preacher. We, who normally must do the speaking, become the hearers. Along with the biblical text we hear application for our own faith and life. Law and Gospel are presented for us to savor slowly with the heart. Meditating on the *St. Matthew Passion* can be a wonderful preaching preview for Lent.

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