

# PREACH

*the Word*

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## *Greetings* IN THE NAME OF JESUS

As you, brothers, prepare to share God's Word with God's people at the end and beginning of another church year, may this issue come as a word of encouragement so that you may find joy in your high calling of preaching the Word.

In this issue we present a stark contrast: words on preaching from a pulpit veteran (Daniel Deutschlander, '68) and words from a younger soldier of the cross (Joel Pankow, '95) who candidly shares some of the struggles he has in preaching. Prof. Deutschlander's article begins what we pray, God willing, will be a beneficial series of articles by various authors on preaching various kinds of texts—Old Testament, Psalms, Gospels, epistles—that will appear in this volume. May they all be a blessing to you. - KCW



## PREACHING OLD TESTAMENT TEXTS

*Daniel M. Deutschlander*

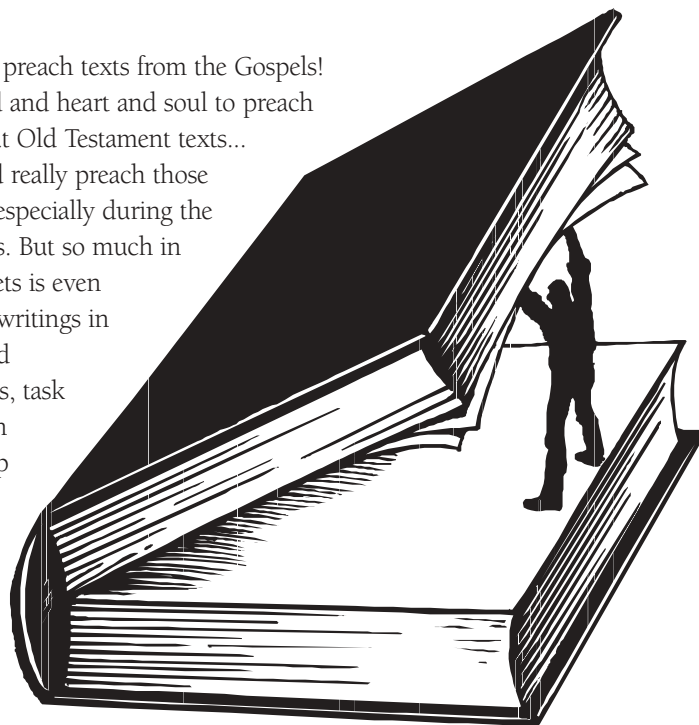
What pure delight it is to preach texts from the Gospels! What a challenge to mind and heart and soul to preach texts from the epistles! But Old Testament texts...

well, I suppose we should really preach those too every now and then, especially during the Advent mid-week services. But so much in the writings of the prophets is even heavier than some of the writings in the epistles. As for the Old Testament historical books, task

# 1 is to find the gospel in many of them and to keep from moralizing in the rest of them. To be sure many of the Psalms are beautiful—but with only 15-18 minutes for the sermon, most of the time might well be eaten up just explaining the

imagery used by the psalmist. And with that we dispose of most of the pages of the Bible for most of the church year. We dispose of those inspired books way too quickly, and that in spite of our heritage, so rich in its use of the Old Testament texts. St. Augustine saw the Old Testament as the indispensable cradle of the New and the New Testament as the interpreter of the Old. Luther's commentaries on Genesis, just to give one example, contain an inexhaustible supply of practical applications of Old Testament texts within the framework of major Reformation themes, i.e., justification, the primacy of the Word as the gospel means of grace, the theology of the cross. I have a 1600 page book of Gerhard's sermons in my library; even the sermons on New Testament texts begin with some reference to an Old Testament Bible story or prophecy. It is as though Gerhard did not think a sermon complete without some significant use of the Old Testament.

Permit this writer then to encourage you to preach Old Testament texts, and to look forward to working with them as much as you look forward to working in other parts of



*Continued on page 3*

# THE GREATEST STRUGGLE

Joel E. Pankow

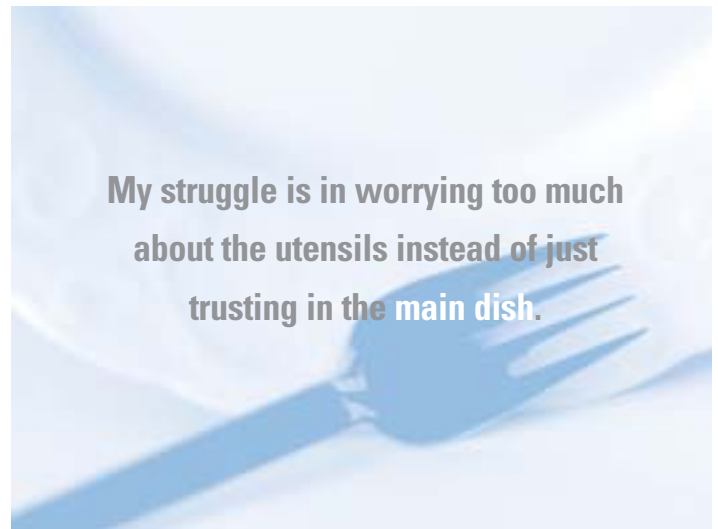
Almost every day that I put dinner on the table for my children, I ask them the question, “What would you like, a fork or a spoon?” In the same way, every week I look at a fresh text and ask myself, “What should I use to drive this truth home? How can I say this in a way that will strike the hearts of God’s people?” I remember Professor Jeske saying something to the effect, “When you go into the pulpit, assume that the congregation is completely bored, and you are there to capture their attention.”

This is the struggle that I have every week, every month, and every year. I’ve tasted the text and chewed on it, but now it’s my job to feed it. When the “company” comes to the House every Sunday, I sometimes feel like I’m picking up the food with my fingers and trying to shove it into their mouths. Oh, every once in a while I might find a plastic fork or spoon, seeming to find an illustration that really drives a point home. I smile and laugh to myself as I see the congregation seem to digest the point and actually enjoy it. But more often than not, it is a struggle.

Do you see the struggle? The struggle is not with the meal. It’s always prepared and ready to eat. It’s not really even with the audience. How patient and hungry our people are—thank God for that! The problem isn’t even with the utensils, if you thought that’s where I was going. The struggle I have week after week is shoving that arrogant Old Man back under the water—the one that keeps telling me, “It’s *your* job to convince! It’s *your* job to touch their hearts!” He tells me, “If you only use the right illustration here, touch the right senses, then you will be able to make that visitor stay!” The struggle is with the fact that I *can’t* make it effective. I *can’t* make people eat it and enjoy it. Only the Holy Spirit can.

I have to continually remind myself that when I serve God’s Word, this isn’t like serving a man-made tofu burger. I don’t have to add spices and sauces to make it somewhat edible. It’s more like serving good Kansas beef—a fine cuisine that tastes good without any ketchup or steak sauce. All you have to do is let the natural grease, the meat, and the fat do the work; they will provide the flavor by themselves. That’s what my Old Man just doesn’t get. The Holy Spirit does the work of convincing through the Word—not my humor, imagination, or lack thereof. Yet I continually pressure myself to try and keep an audience. My struggle is in worrying too much about the utensils instead of just trusting in the main dish. (I’m doing it again with this article.)

The more I read *Walther’s Law and Gospel* the more I admire and try to emulate not just what he said but the way in which he said



it. What catches my attention is the way he hits right at the heart of a matter with a strong statement. For instance, in his 20th evening lecture he says, “When a place has been assigned to a Lutheran candidate of theology. . . that place ought to be to him the dearest, most beautiful, and most precious spot on earth.” Doesn’t that direct law statement perk up your ears more than a “In the twentieth century, a man once lived...” Walther didn’t waste any time in hammering down the law and then getting to the sweet gospel. When he did it so well, it naturally kept people’s attention. It seemed to me he wasn’t worried about keeping people’s attention with illustrations, even though he did use them.

Outreach marketing and so much advice today is all about themes and catchy slogans such as “Honor our heroes!” I’m tired of trying to be catchy. I don’t need to be. God calls me to do basically one thing: preach the Word. When I do this, then the Holy Spirit can use His Words to drive people into absolute despair and cast them into hell and then pull them out of the fire by the blood of Jesus—no matter what my theme is. So I need to say to myself, “If the congregation doesn’t like this, then too bad. They don’t need entertainment. They don’t need to laugh. They don’t need to be ‘captivated’ by the boy who learned to run with two broken legs because nobody told him he couldn’t. Their sinful natures and their reason need to be offended. They need to be sent into hell and then rescued by the gospel.”

It shouldn’t be a struggle for me to do this. Yet my Old Adam insists that the pressure is on me to preach an effectual sermon. I know what utensil I need to give him. He’s already got it sticking in his heart. And the next time he comes up, I need to drive it a little deeper. That way I can enjoy what I do a little bit more when I remember that it doesn’t matter what utensil I use in the pulpit—as long as the people are served the right food: the law and the gospel.

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our Lord's mind and heart. For that, after all, is what we are always doing when we work with his Word—mining his mind and letting him expose and impart his heart to our heart. If we start with the warranted assumption that God did not waste words in his Word and that he let none fall idly from his lips, then we will take the attitude of Samuel also to the Old Testament texts: *Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening (1 Samuel 3:10)*. And the assumption is a warranted one. Of all the billions of things that God could have recorded in his Word, he had these stories and prophecies and songs and laws and gospel pictures recorded. Why? Because they have an eternal relevance for our lives of faith, for all people of all times. To be sure, it is easier to see that and use it in some parts of the Old Testament than in others. There may well be texts in the Old Testament that we will never preach on because we will never understand them well enough to preach on them. That is true of some New Testament texts as well, but that does not deter us from preaching the New Testament. Apart from the pictures of Christ in some of the sacrifices, much of the ceremonial law may do little more for us than display God's extraordinary standard of holiness and our corresponding distance from it. Even if we never preach on it, the ceremonial law may move us to marvel all the more at the condescension of the Son of God in becoming one of us. Or it may provoke us to still more gratitude for the gospel which has freed us from the impossible burden of the whole of the law. Some of the prophecies of Ezekiel and Daniel may leave us with our heads spinning in the clouds. Perhaps the best we can do with them is look up into the heavens and declare with awe: *In heaven we will still have something to learn! We will always be students of the Word, never its masters!* Such texts may not easily lend themselves to the pulpit. Nevertheless hundreds of others do lend themselves very well to practical and evangelical preaching, to preaching that is according to the old rule: *Schriftgemäss, Bekenntnisgemäss, und Zeitgemäss.*

Perhaps it will help if we start with the simple and so useful assumption: **Every text is unique.** It makes no difference whether the text is from the Old Testament or the New, keeping that assumption in mind may help to guard against preaching the same sermon every Sunday or from using the same application, no matter what the text: *This is the Word of the Lord. Now let's go out and share it with our neighbors and relatives.* Just as the miracles of Jesus are all the same only different, so too are the Bible stories of the Old Testament. Jesus miracles all prove that he is the omnipotent Son of God who cares about our human condition. But each recorded miracle is at the same time unique, containing in its telling a lesson found nowhere else in quite the same way. So also the Bible history of the Old Testament. Each story makes the point that God is serious about his Word, both the law and the gospel. Each story illustrates the truth that grace is always

undeserved, that we live by faith, and that we walk as pilgrims under the cross. And at the same time each story is unique and sharpens our understanding of those eternal truths just a little bit more. It is part of the art of the preacher of the Word that he is always looking for what makes these inspired words, this particular story, unique. He is always asking the text: *What are you doing here? Of all the things that God could have said, could have told us about, why this?* That quest from week to week deepens from year to year the pastor's awe in the presence of the Word and his zeal to study it always again with the wonder of one reading it for the first time.

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Perhaps you would like to preach a series of sermons on the patriarchs. What an example of faith we have in Abraham! Each story from his life illustrates some particular aspect of faith and of the life of faith. The call of Abraham: the Word of God produces a trust that has the fruit of love and a willingness to abandon everything. The sacrifice of Isaac: how complete that everything is which God may call us to sacrifice. The separation from Lot: how unfair the life of faith may appear on the outside and in the short run. The prayer for Sodom and Gomorrah: how lovingly the heart of the saint prays and suffers even for the perverse, and how loving the heart of God who listen to such a prayer and then in love destroys. There is that amazing chapter whose contents crown all of the rest of the great patriarch's life, Genesis 15. That's one of those great "knock your socks off" chapters, no matter how many times you read it. Abraham has everything and nothing. On the outside all is prosperity and success. But inside is suffering; inside is the cross. For the child of promise, the child who should be the ancestor of the Savior, has not come. The promise is all that Abraham has. Yes, that's all! And that's everything! The promise, the promise, the promise! What was promised to Abraham, the Savior, we have. But still there is much about that Savior that for us too remains promise, nothing more than promise, nothing less either. Under the cross there is but the promise of the resurrection. In the midst of what seems like hell there is only the promise of heaven. That's all. That's enough. That it is enough proves for us the power of the gospel, that faith is preserved simply by promise, in spite of all outward evidence that contradicts the promise. Such lessons are sharpened with each reading from the life of the patriarchs. They

Continued on page 4

Continued from page 3

are all mirrors of our own struggles with sin and its consequences, and with the victory of the gospel under the cross. They are mirrors of faith that overcomes the world (Hebrews 11-12, 1 John 1-2).

Or perhaps you might consider a series on the Judges. You will notice how easily and how quickly the church falls and almost disappears after she is delivered by the intervention of God in history. It never takes generations. It's all over in 20 years and sometimes less! That's the way it was then. That's the way it has been ever since. Doesn't that suggest themes for sermons on faithfulness to the Word, warnings against apostasy, a watchful eye, a teaching church that is not content with a Lutheran fundamentalism (*Jesus loves me, this I know; and this is all I want to know.*)? You might note how each apostasy is worse than the one before, each judgment on the people more severe than the judgment before. You might observe that each of the judges has some unique strength for the day and some unique weaknesses that fit the culture from which he came as well. You may end up asking yourself: *Is the Word of God and the message of the gospel always counter-cultural? Have I seen that it is counter-cultural with respect to other cultures and failed to grasp that it is as well to mine? Do my people recognize or understand that?* The culture of the Book of Judges is syncretistic. It is an "Every man is his own bible" culture. Each one of the judges confronts the culture which he at the same time mirrors. Samson for example in most of his life is a man of opportunity squandered. (It is nevertheless interesting to note in passing that Samson is one of the favorite judges used as a type of Christ by Gerhard and others.) All of them were called to live by faith, to preach and teach faith, to be pictures of Christ in one or more of his saving actions. Most of them are stumbling heroes. They struggle as we do with sin and weakness, some of which they do not recognize because they have not listened to the word they preached as well as they should have. In their lives as in the lives of the nation, God demonstrates his faithfulness to his law and gospel, that he takes it seriously whether anyone else will or not. (*To be continued in next issue.*)

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Martin Luther College*

## MORE ON LORD'S PRAYER SERIES

In response to the article in last issue about utilizing the Lord's Prayer in a sermon series that ties in with the church year, Pastor Gordon Peters wrote:

"Another tie-in that might be considered for the fall sermon series you suggested is linking the first sermon with its theme of 'Our Father in heaven' to the church festival during the following week, St. Michael and All Angels. The link of course would be that one of the ways our heavenly Father cares for us is through his angels.

"Actually, if a person so desired, the entire series could be made to work quite well with the theme of the post-Michaelmas Sundays, that theme being that we are in the church militant which contends, until our Lord returns in glory, with those forces that array themselves against his Word and Sacraments."

### QUESTIONS? COMMENTS?

If you have any questions or comments about *Preach the Word*, feel free to contact this year's editor directly at [wesselkc@mlc-wels.edu](mailto:wesselkc@mlc-wels.edu)

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