

# PREACH

*the Word*

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*according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 1:1)*

## A SACRISTY PRAYER



Just a few minutes now before worship begins. The preacher stands alone; the assembly waits.

Do you pause before a framed sacristy prayer? I've often whispered "God, give me the words you want me to say. Keep me from speaking ideas that would harm your people." Perhaps the prayer the

Lord of the Church has heard most often – no matter the century, continent or language – has been simply "God have mercy on me, a sinner." In behalf of the new guys, our synod's candidates hitting their first assignments this summer, here's an idea: Psalm 130.

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.* Sin is real and sin is my tragic flaw. Sin damns, whether or not I feel my sinfulness. *O Lord, hear my voice.* I recognize the interplay of LORD and Lord; I have your command to pray and your promise to answer. *Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.* My prayer to you is not in the name of hours of exegesis, clear transitions, reading the right books or enough practice, no. *Mercy!*

*If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?* I'm not standing here reciting "We're all sinners." *I am unworthy to be called your child. I am even more unworthy to be your preacher. But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.* You have led me to believe in my sin's forgiveness for Christ's sake; I am going to obey your call to preach.

*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope.* I do not put my hope in my mind, in my preparation, in survival skills born of desperation, or even in this congregation's good nature. I put my hope in the Word of God I will be holding in my hands and speaking with my lips. *My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning.* Like a tired but anxious sentinel, I'm waiting for what I know must come soon: your light. It may be dark right at this

moment, but you will come through – again – and for that I will wait.

*O Israel, put your hope in the LORD.* God's true Israel awaits his word for them today. *For with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.* Truth and love have reached to this day and this place. Redeem is a blood-red word, not partial or conditional; my Jesus is enough.

*He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.* This is not about me. Faith, however, believes in the God of Free and Faithful Grace. I can talk about what you have done for us. Absolutely!

## FIRST-PERSON SERMONS

*Pastor Brent Merten, Eagle, CO*

I recently purchased a book you might find of some interest. *It's All in How You Tell It: Preaching First Person Expository Messages*, Haddon & Torrey Robinson, 150 pages, \$9.99 from Christian Book Distributors.

As the title indicates, the entire book is about doing first-person sermons in character. There's some fairly practical advice on how to transport the character into the 21st century, as opposed to transporting the congregation to 1000 B.C., or whenever. Other advice concerns the pros and cons of using costumes and props. Of interest is the author's insistence on doing an exegetical study of the text before writing the sermon.

In my fifteen years as a pastor, I had only done a first-person sermon once prior to reading this book. This past fall, however, I decided to do an Advent series (on Sunday mornings) using Series A texts. I did John the Baptist, James the brother of Jesus, and Joseph. Although there may be no more of these for a while, it definitely made for an interesting way of writing – and delivering – a sermon.

I didn't use costumes or props. I did wander a bit among the people. My congregation seemed to enjoy the series.

## NOW THAT YOU MENTION IT

1 The Bible calls death “the King of Terrors.” No wonder we often use the euphemism *to pass away* instead of *to die*. Who doesn’t desire to remove or at least soften that unbearable shock?

This past year a young neighborhood girl was killed in a car accident. Our public school sent home notes to parents counseling them not to use the term *pass away* “as it does not communicate clearly to children.”

Is that reminder from a secular educator in place for Lutheran preachers? Do we speak as Scripture does: “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the *death* of his saints.” (Ps 116). We who know Christ do not grieve like those who have no hope.

2 “As well” is a British way of saying “too,” e.g. “In London there was cold toast for breakfast, and there were sliced tomatoes on my plate as well.” Could it be that this phrase is showing up everywhere in our sermons because we imagine it sounds erudite?

3 “To beg the question” is a British phrase as well. This one means “to miss the point” or “to skirt the real issue.” It’s not another way of saying “The point you just made leads me to fervently desire more information,” or “Fairness demands that I bring up another issue.”

## EV.

The mission congregation left *Evangelical* off the WEF unit sign. The cast aluminum letters would’ve added about \$500 to the cost, and of course, we wanted to be good stewards. In your opinion, would “Ev.” have been an improvement?

If anyone ought to be righteously defensive of the word *evangelical*, surely it would be a Lutheran preacher. Now you may be of the opinion that the new kind of Evangelicals swiped our middle name; you may be sore at ELCA for being the Lutherans who get all the mileage out of the word. But we hardly used it anyway. And “Ev.” doesn’t communicate a great deal more to those who see it on your church stationery or worship folder. Whether it was pastors or church secretaries who got tired of typing out its eleven letters, the truth seems to be that some of us got tired of “evangelical.”

Whether we type it out or not is finally not the point. The point is that the word  $\epsilon\upsilon\alpha\gamma\gamma\epsilon\lambda\acute{\iota}\zeta\omega$  explains to us and to others our true culture. It is a beautiful word.

## A NOVELIST LISTENS TO PREACHERS

Prof. Paul Eickmann, Watertown, WI

In the sixth chapter of *Barchester Towers* by the nineteenth century British novelist Anthony Trollope, the author allowed himself three longish paragraphs about the preaching he himself had heard:

“There is perhaps no greater hardship at present inflicted on mankind in civilized and free countries than the necessity of listening to sermons. No one but a preaching clergyman has in these realms the power of compelling an audience to sit silent and be tormented. No one but a preaching clergyman can revel in platitudes, truisms, and untruisms, and yet receive, as his undisputed privilege, the same respectful demeanor as though words of impassioned eloquence or persuasive logic fell from his lips.

“Let a professor of law or physics find his place in a lecture-room and there pour forth jejune words and useless, empty phrases, and he will pour them forth to empty benches. Let a barrister attempt to talk without talking well and he will talk but seldom. A judge’s charge needs to be listened to by none but the jury, prisoner and jailer. A member of Parliament can be coughed down or counted out. But no one can rid himself of the preaching clergyman. He is the bore of the age, the nightmare that disturbs our Sunday’s rest, the incubus that overloads our religion and makes God’s service distasteful. We are not forced into church, no, but we desire more than that. We desire not to be forced to stay away.

“With what complacency will a young [preacher] deduce false conclusions from misunderstood texts, then threaten us with all the penalties of Hades if we neglect to comply with the injunctions he has given us! Yes, my too-self-confident juvenile friend, I do believe in the unadulterated word which you hold there in your hand; but you must pardon me if, in some things, I doubt your interpretation. The Bible is good ...but you must excuse me, my insufficient young lecturer, if I yawn over your imperfect sentences, your repeated phrases, your false pathos, your drawlings and denouncings, your hemming and hawing. (And here I must make a protest against the pretense so often put forward by the working clergy, that they are overburdened by the multitude of sermons to be preached).”

No doubt the novelist’s picture is overdrawn and satiric, but ... should we not demand it of ourselves to show great mercy and respect for our congregations?



## VERNACULAR

- expressed in the native language of a place
- using plain, everyday, ordinary language
- often considered “non-standard,” as opposed to literary or learned language

Getting God’s Word into the vernacular has always been one of the preacher’s chief goals.

Classical Greek was available to him, but the Holy Spirit had his New Testament written down in Koine. The language of his mother church was Latin, but translator Luther said “I’m going to make Moses speak German.” 20th-century Christians listening to their children growing up in the USA said “We need a Bible and a hymnal in something other than Shakespearean English.”

### THREE FROM WALTHER

- 1 “My friends, do not hesitate to preach the Law. People may revile it, yet they do so only with their mouths. What you say when preaching the Law to people is something that their own conscience is preaching to them every day. Nor could we convert any person by preaching the Gospel to him unless we had preached the Law to him first.” (9)
- 2 “To God nothing is an accident. He knows events before they occur, and he determines beforehand the limits of each happening. While in no causal relation to sin, God had foreseen in eternity its entrance into the world, and in eternity had prepared those safeguards against the ravages of sin which he afterwards proclaimed in the form of compassionate, merciful, comforting promises, which he made to men in their ruined condition under sin.” (Preface, v)
- 3 “They tell [the jailer in Philippi] unqualifiedly: ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.’ That makes the apostles’ practice plain. In every instance where their word had produced faith, they administered baptism immediately. They did not say: ‘We have to take you through an extensive course of instruction and expound to you accurately and thoroughly all the articles of the Christian creed. After that, we shall have to put you on probation to see whether you can become an approved Christian.’ ” (131)



## “THE VERNACULAR OF OUR AGE IS ... ?”

In 1988 the BBC presented a television special, “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,” by C.S. Lewis. In a land called Narnia it is always winter, and its inhabitants suffer under the thrall of a witch. Four children (“sons of Adam”) find themselves imperiled. The two boys and two girls learn some ancient lore: a great champion shall make his appearance to redeem the Land. Aslan is the magnificent lion who lays down his life for his friends. Watching this video, a Christian family immediately recognizes and enjoys LW&W as a parable with references to Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

Now the financial success of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* is fresh in the nostrils of Hollywood, so Disney bought the rights to LW&W. The studio will play down the more transparently Christian aspects of Lewis’ story, while hoping – for financial reasons – to stretch the Narnia trilogy into a 7-part series.

“Lewis himself had a love-hate relationship with Hollywood,’ says Terry Lindvall, who will teach a Christian theology course at the College of William & Mary this fall . . . ‘He believed there was death in the camera. Meaning, when you translate word to image, the imagination dies.’

“Lewis believed in translating faith into the vernacular. And, as Lindvall puts it, ‘*The vernacular of our age is movies.*’”

(“The Wonderful World of Narnia,” by Susan Wloszczyna, USA Today, 3 May 05).

What are some implications for us preachers if it’s true that people are absorbing their information via images, as opposed to Greek-style propositions and bullets? Do you accept the statement that *the vernacular of our age is movies?*

- millions of persons we are trying to reach with the Word of life will watch movies this week
- many will do their watching in a theater setting
- others will sit before a computer to learn
- is an opportunity at hand for you to preach online?

You won’t get much of an argument from any of us *sola Scriptura*-types that words are more important than pictures. It’s just that preaching already requires Scriptura in the mouth of a human being. That necessarily involves an image – the image of a preacher – as well as his book.



## TOP 4 SERMON IDEAS

Pastor Bob Hellmann, Montrose, MN

- 1 Say your theme twice (like Paul Harvey does) to emphasize it. Say it often during the sermon.
- 2 Get rid of seamless transitions. I heard a sermon a few years ago on vacation that passed from one part to another in such a seamless manner that I could never get a grip on it (like playing hoops with a grease-covered ball). When you are going on to a new part, announce clearly. Help the listener know you are making progress.
- 3 The basic unit of communication today is the bulleted list. Write your sermon manuscript that way, with one thought per line. That way you boil each sentence down to its essence without having to write every word out. This is an updated version of Professor Eickmann's *Telegram-style* approach. Makes it easier to learn, more logical, and easier to listen to.
- 4 Would it be worthwhile to form some kind of online bulletin board for sermon prep each week based on the readings for the week? People could post possible applications, ask exegetical questions, suggest outlines, etc. Maybe this is already being done somewhere and I don't know about it. I wonder if a Lenten series could be hammered together in this way. [One such WELS site is at <<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/winkeltextstudy/>>. This might be especially useful for pastors serving in more isolated locations. BG]

## YOU CAN PRINT THAT

- 1 "... we have been repeatedly taught that we must not tempt God in prayer, that is, we must not fix a time, measure, goal, manner or person – how, when, or by what means he shall answer us. We must humbly leave all this to him who in his divine, incomprehensible wisdom will do all things well. And we must not doubt that prayer is most certainly answered (even if it looks otherwise)."

Martin Luther (*Exhortation to Prayer against the Turks*)

2. "God's awful wrath ... is graphically portrayed in countless histories of Scripture. We see it vividly in the thunder and lightning at Sinai, in the overflowing of the world by the water of the flood in which all flesh perished ... in the command of God that told the Israelites that they were utterly to destroy all the Canaanites, men, women and children. We have heard these stories so often and have told them so often that the horror that breathes forth from them often passes us by, and so many times our own indifference communicates itself to our children. When we teach these stories we ought to stop and think of what they really mean, lest they become nothing more to us than empty words piously recited. It is difficult for children, especially in the lower grades, to grasp highly abstract ideas. They must learn to see what the wrath of God is by observing what the wrath of God *does*."

Siegbert Becker (*The Use of Law and Gospel in Motivation for Christian Living*, 1974, teachers' conference paper)

- 3 "Writing is, for most, laborious and slow. The mind travels faster than the pen, consequently, writing becomes a question of learning to make occasional wing shots, bringing down the bird of thought as it flashes by. A writer is a gunner, sometimes waiting in the blind for something to come in, sometimes roaming the countryside hoping to scare something up. Like other gunners, the writer must cultivate patience, working many covers to bring down one partridge."

E. B. White (*The Elements of Style*)

- 4 "Tell Archippus: 'See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord.'"

(to the Colossians, 4:17)

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**QUESTIONS? COMMENTS?** If you have any questions or comments about *Preach the Word*, feel free to contact this year's editor directly at [tomjeske@phonet.com](mailto:tomjeske@phonet.com)

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