

Preach the Word

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A new volume welcomes a new writer. Prof. Paul Koelpin teaches History and Religion at Martin Luther College. He regularly preaches for chapel where he hears a wide variety of preachers.

There Is No Substitute for Preparation

During one of my first seminary homiletics classes, Prof. Leroy Dobberstein offered the following bit of instruction (in “free translation” since I don’t remember his words exactly): “Most of you have a vision of what you’ll be like standing in a pulpit. And some of you might think that it’s really all about what I’ll call ‘the performance,’ but I want to let you know early on that there is no substitute for preparation. A pastor who prepares by studying the Bible text well generally preaches well because he has something to say.” That lesson stuck with me. It was reiterated by a veteran pastor when I first served in a parish setting. He explained to me that after several decades of preaching, he still followed a rigorous ritual of preparation before preaching—text study early in the week, commentary reading, detailed outline, typed manuscript (he was only partially computer-literate), memorization, and an early-morning practice every Sunday during which he preached the entire sermon several times from the pulpit to an empty sanctuary.

The initial issue of this volume of *Preach the Word* has preparation as its focus. I have found the axiom that “there is no substitute for preparation” was good advice. When I make time for the input, the output is generally clearer, cleaner, crisper and more contemplative. There is nothing earth-shaking about this reflection. I submit this more as encouragement than insight. Dear pastor, please continue to spend generous time in your sermon preparation. Don’t be tempted to take shortcuts. Allow the text to gestate. Let the truths work their way through your thinking.

Dear pastor, please continue to spend generous time in your sermon preparation.

Start early—devotionally. Focus on the “operative words.” Keep track of the ideas (the illustrations and analogies) that will occur throughout the week. Work on flow as you craft your sermon.

Don’t be afraid to rewrite—even to cut a “great story” or a “great line” for the sake of clarity and focus.

A pastor’s weekly schedule is a complex routine (though often far from “routine”) of administration and devotion and instruction and visitation and communication and consultation and composition. A host of unforeseen complications can interrupt your best laid plans. Sometimes God’s sheep need immediate attention. Sometimes time simply isn’t on your side. So you do the best that you can with the time that you have—you exercise “sanctified stewardship” of that gift too.

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I am, however, concerned that our sense of time has been affected by our use of modern technology. I see it in myself and the students that I teach. Somewhat ironically, digital devices have made us more impatient. And impatience is an insidious enemy that weakens our resolve to be thorough. Computer programs may also dupe us into thinking that things are easier than they really are. Information is still just information—it’s what you do with it that matters. Thinking, it seems to me, simply takes time. I hate even to mention the peculiarly addictive nature of technology that may, in the end, cause us to squander more time than we save.

The operative word here is “time.” There is no substitute for time spent with the Word, allowing the Spirit to enlighten us with the manifest ways God’s will and God’s love apply to countless circumstances in life. Sermonizing is intensive work—often difficult, even stressful—but there is great profit in time well spent—for you and your hearers. And you just may find—and this is my hope—that your sermon time flies because you’re having so much fun.

The Preparation Process

Students at Martin Luther College will occasionally ask me about preaching. They are often most curious about how I “get ideas” for chapel devotions or sermons. They ask questions like: “Are commentaries helpful?”, “How long does it take you to come up with a focus?”, “Do you follow a set study pattern when you write a sermon or devotion?”, “How do you keep your preaching of law and gospel from becoming ‘sorta repetitious?’”, “Does it really get easier the more often you do it?” How would you respond to these queries?

I thought it might be beneficial to survey pastor-trained colleagues on the faculty about their personal perspectives on the sermon-writing process. All of them have had a parish ministry experience before accepting a call to teach. All of them continue to model preaching as part of the regular rotation of chapel preachers at MLC. Many of them continue to do regular preaching in local congregations.

What follows (here and in the next issue) are some of their collected insights. Each of the respondents brought something unique to the discussion. There was general consensus on some matters; a wide divergence of practice on others. Several commented on how their approach has modified or changed over the years.

Start Early

- The sooner the better as far as sermon prep. Here I mean not just the nuts and bolts of study. I mean letting a text sink in, letting me sleep on it, letting the sermon or sermon-to-be percolate, marinate, and gestate, so that I don’t just blivate.
- Allow the Spirit’s “simmering process” to happen because almost always a text-in-the-mind relates to the events of life during the week.
- If I were back in a parish setting I think that I would experiment with some sort of schedule that would result in overlapping preparation, so that a text study would be done three weeks in advance.

Work in the Original Text and Reviewing Translations

- I try to avoid just “checking the translation.” I am looking for the nuance, the concept, the something or other, that does not quite make it into English. There is often more pith, muscle, and color in the original. The original makes me slow down and think, makes me focus.
- I do not usually [review multiple translations] during the initial stages of my study of the text. I don’t expect to get as much insight into the meaning of the text from a variety of translations as I do from the original text and from learned, detailed commentaries.
- I find myself paying much, much more attention to the little particle words in the Greek than I did earlier in my ministry—the *men*, *de*,

gar, *ara*, *oun*, etc. I also prefer [to exegize] bigger, logical chunks of the text.

- Make sure that you see the forest and not just so many trees. I can’t emphasize enough the value of studying the text in context. Sometimes our exegetical methods, I think, value word study at the expense of overall meaning. The result is often a sermon that doesn’t connect well to hearers.

“Starter” Questions

- One way that I will meditate on a text is to ask a series of questions—SPACEPETS (strange enough to remember!) is the acronym:
 - Sin to confess?
 - Promise to believe?
 - Attitude to change?
 - Christ to reveal?
 - Error to avoid?
 - Prayer to pray?
 - Example to follow?
 - Truth to tell?
 - Something to thank God for?
- What did this text say to the first hearers/readers? Why did that have to be said? What’s the same/different about modern hearers/readers? What chief point(s) should I emphasize? What details/points can wait for another Sunday, another preacher, another point in the church year? Are there common misunderstandings, misapplications, misappropriations of the text that I need to address?
- Do I get the big picture? How does this text fit in its context? What is the author’s purpose here, and what are the main points he makes to accomplish that purpose? Can I account for all the details in the text, or do some of them stare at me and suggest a different understanding or perhaps force me to rethink the whole thing? I don’t actually have a list of questions I go through, but the ones I just created represent some of the things that are on my mind in one way or another as I study a text.
- I tend to be thinking of appropriation/application themes right from the very start. If I can compare to the work we do in education, the *first* things we think of in planning a course are the intended learning outcomes for the course. What is it we want students to take away with them? So too in sermon preparation, I’m thinking first in terms of the spiritual outcome for God’s people. Where will the message of this text intersect with their lives? How will I apply it to their hearts and their hands?
- My writing method has leaned toward inductive from the start of my ministry. My instinct has not been to tell the congregation what the whole point is going to be in the bulletin before the sermon even starts. My brainstorming doesn’t separate application from illustration from points drawn from the text from the key expressions that come to me

for any of those. It often happens that nothing much is going on in all that [brainstorm] scribbling and then the dam sort of bursts, and the general shape and central point of the sermon appears and I can hardly write fast enough to get it down . . . that's on a good day.

find something wrong with that . . . something missing in that, then you come to me. But until then . . . the Father treasures the act, and so do I. It's the reason I love him."

Application/Appropriation Ideas

- The preacher cannot be a hermit. In other words, he has to remain widely read. I get many sermon ideas from magazine articles and opinion pages and essays. I don't mean that my sermons start out with, "Did you read what was in the paper yesterday?" I do mean that I can talk about the ideas that are affecting people and the way they think and live.
- I ask: Is the gospel explicit and fresh? I remember preaching not long ago on Jesus saying, "The reason the Father loves me is that I lay down my life." Those words are a gold mine for exploring the willingness of Christ, the Father's treasuring of the act, and faith's defiant response to Satan, "When you can

- I very consciously try to mine the historical background and paint a picture of the setting of the text that either subtly or overtly gives the impression that the world is, basically, "same as it ever was"—the problems the holy writers faced are still around today. But that also creates the atmosphere (hopefully) in the sermon that if the problems are the same as back then, then the answers and promises of God must still be good for our day and age.
- What guides me as I work through the text is looking for ways to *convict and comfort*. Also on my radar screen as I work on a text is finding descriptions of the *active obedience of Christ*—an all too neglected part of our preaching in my humble opinion.

More of this survey—including thoughts on commentary usage and the application of law and gospel—will follow in the next issue.



God's Treasure . . . From a Clay Jar

I thought it might be useful to feature sermon excerpts, along with comments, for Bible texts that I have particularly enjoyed studying and proclaiming. My plan is to offer two Old Testament, two Gospel, and two Epistle "favorites."

I first studied the Old Testament lesson below during my seminary years—it became a "summer sermon" that I have preached more

often than any other sermon that I've written. Readers will know the lesson as the account of Elijah and the "still, small voice." The text speaks powerfully to the believer who feels all alone in the world. The lesson also applies directly to the proclaimer—the "Elijah" whom God uses as his mouthpiece to people.

Sermon Excerpt – 1 Kings 19:9-18 (ILCW-Series A, Pentecost 12) The LORD's Whisper Wakes Us Up	Comment
A whisper is a soft sound, yet it can have a tremendous impact. Walk to the front of a noisy classroom and begin to talk in a very quiet voice—you will soon have the attention of the entire room. Elijah the prophet heard a "quiet whisper" from the LORD that refocused his attention. He was troubled, confused and depressed, so the LORD set his thinking straight. A whisper "woke Elijah up"—brought him back to reality, to how the LORD works in this sinful world.	<i>Although there is something "counter-intuitive" about this theophany (which the introduction seeks to highlight) we can understand the impact.</i>

<p>Elijah had just contested with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Could there be any doubt about who was the true God? Instead, Jezebel put out a death threat against Elijah. So God's prophet fled south into the Sinai desert and hid in the cave. In despair and self-pity he said, "I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."</p>	<p><i>The context is vital because it contrasts a display of God's power with his peaceful revelation to Elijah.</i></p>
<p>Are we ever tempted to think or talk like Elijah? This world—our very nation—is in severe moral decline. Perversion of every kind is rampant—some even given a stamp of approval by the government. There is a low regard for the sanctity of human life. The family unit, God's design for order, is often broken.</p>	<p><i>Are people feeling sorry for themselves? This is a "set-up" section.</i></p>
<p>If society in general is falling away from the will of God, what about the state of affairs in the church?! Many religious leaders feel that the Scripture has very little to say to today's world. An editorial in a weekly magazine admitted: "In religion, as in politics, the appropriate analogy is the old hamburger-chain slogan: 'Have it your way.'"</p>	<p><i>Even religion is in decline! Another "set-up."</i></p>
<p>Are you feeling like a modern-day Elijah? Alone in your beliefs. Unpopular with society. <i>Therein lies the danger. This text isn't addressing the blatant unbelief of the "world," but the condition of our own trust in the LORD.</i> Self-pity and frustration open us up to another set of temptations. We may begin to harbor a "judgment mentality" which sees the wrongs all around and wishes God would "do something" about it. But what about me and my sin and my need to repent? At the same time, we may be tempted to lose confidence in God's Word. We may be led to throw up our hands and shout: "Does God really know what he's doing?" And then . . . to run away and hide.</p>	<p><i>The critical issue: it's not about "the world out there." The focused law of this lesson emphasizes personal repentance.</i></p>
<p>God did not reveal his presence in the mighty wind, or the earthquake or the fire. Why not? Because the LORD was waking Elijah up from doubt and despair to a recognition of his control and his grace. The LORD's truth was this: judgment, law and wonders don't convert or win back hearts. Elijah, take me at my word!</p>	<p><i>Take up the challenging issue suggested by the text—why did God not reveal himself in power?</i></p>
<p>What was the message of the whisper? The text doesn't tell us explicitly, but the quietness caught Elijah's attention. The LORD was telling him not to lose confidence in God's control. Saving souls is the LORD's main interest, and the message of grace is his main tool. The solution to even the toughest of life's problems is found in the consistent application the Word of God—just a whisper, not a show of force. St. John calls Jesus "the Word"—the one who communicated the will and love of God to sinners. Jesus was clear—he preached, "Repent"; he also announced, "Peace." The gospel works quietly—we won't "wow" anybody into belief. Only the message of forgiveness of sin through Christ converts. Wake up. Take heart.</p>	<p><i>Underscore the power of the Word—recall Luke 16. Abraham responds to the rich man, "If they [your brothers] do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."</i></p>
<p>Was Elijah "the only one left"? God revealed that he had preserved 7,000 people who had not bowed to idols. Reviewing this account in his letter to the Romans, St. Paul makes this application: "So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace." Such comfort and assurance speak directly to our fears and anxieties. We are not alone. God promises to preserve his faithful believers in every difficulty wherever they are. Sometimes it takes a whisper from our LORD to wake us up.</p>	<p><i>Application: the church will always be "a remnant chosen by grace."</i></p>

