

Preach the Word

Vol. 17 No. 2

November/December 2013



Preaching to the Choir

By Paul Koelpin

I recently heard a sermon during which the preacher declared, “We are all sinners on the road to hell.” Really? Didn’t Jesus rescue me from hell? How did we (those gathered for worship) end up with those condemned for eternity?

The charitable critic would allow that the preacher simply misspoke. He meant to put his punitive perspective in the past tense—“we were on the road to hell.” But I suspect that there was purpose behind the statement. I think that the preacher was attempting to put some bite into the law. He was trying to “afflict the comfortable” by making hell a reality. In so doing, the preacher confused rather than clarified. What is a believer who has come to worship supposed to think? Am I saved or not?

It seems to me that Lutheran preachers should preach from the perspective that the people in the pew are a group of believers gathered for worship. They are, in essence, “preaching to the choir.” Here, then, is the confusing question for many Lutheran preachers: How do I condemn those for whom there is now no condemnation? Does “preaching to the choir” mean the sermon will soft-pedal the will of God? By no means. Behavior that runs contrary to God’s commands is sin. And the “soul who sins is the one who will die” (Ezekiel 18). But believers “will live, even though they die” (John 11). God has made eternity in heaven secure for the believer in Jesus Christ.

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What does the “choir” need to hear? They need to know about discord. Preach the struggle. Daily life is a continuous battle with a sinful nature that is unreformable. We cannot make our sinful natures better; we can only drown that Old Adam. So we live in repentance and enter God’s house with the words of the tax collector on our lips: “God have mercy on me, a sinner” (Luke 18).

The law must be preached as a warning to sinners that spiritual indifference or the justification of sinful behavior can indeed lead to separation from God. There is no sidestepping condemnation here—God will judge impenitence and unbelief. Believers can fall from grace if they give sin a foothold. But we are preaching repentance not conversion.

Preach the struggle. Preach the restoration of harmony.

Preach the restoration of harmony—the choir loves to hear how discord resolves. Preach forgiveness and grace. The gospel must be proclaimed in words that intone more than a standard refrain. Preach the gospel words—justified, redeemed, reconciled, rescued—with the freshness of David who prayed: “Restore to me the joy of your salvation” (Psalm 51). Let the choir sing: Alleluia!

The choir needs to appreciate that gospel life does not follow the conventions of logic—the first will be last, whoever loses his life will find it, the humble will be exalted. Jesus won’t allow self-interest or human reason to rule supreme. He forces the focus away from what is natural to that which is uniquely and divinely supernatural. Faith is a gift from God, not the product of human wisdom. So much of the teaching that was being peddled among the people in Jesus’ day was a focus on self—my needs, my life, my righteousness, my hopes, my desires. So Jesus adjusted the perception of human experience. Christ conquered by a cross! Can there be a more powerful paradox!

Yes, the cross is real for believers. God allows his believers to confront temptation and battle against Satan, self, and stuff with the tools he provides in his Word of promise. Ask this question often: What is the purpose of this sermon? Lutheran sermons are not preached primarily to change behavior, but to emphasize how God has changed the heart.

The Preparation Process – Part II

You may recall from the previous issue that I surveyed pastor-trained colleagues on the Martin Luther College faculty for insights into their personal preparation and writing process. What follows is a second installment of insights gleaned from those responses.

Regarding the Use of Commentaries

- Think of yourself as an equal, respectful partner in a conversation with commentators about a text. You have good training and tools. Be willing to be instructed—and to disagree.
- I consult commentaries, but late in the game, so to speak. I prefer not to be preconditioned by what this or that commentary says. So I try to do my own thinking and pondering first, then consult commentaries to get the thoughts of others on difficult verses or simply to gain some further content and application ideas.
- I do consult commentaries, especially when I feel like I'm dealing with a more thorny section of Scripture, or when I'm having mental block issues. But, to be honest, I sometimes avoid them because I feel that they just muddy the waters of my thinking and my attempt to get down to one single, simple point of emphasis. It's too easy for me to try to cram too much into one sermon.... I can get to the other thoughts at another time. That helps to avoid the frustrating "whole counsel of God" sermon rut that can also become very tiresome for hearers.
- I'm always surprised when I hear that some preachers purposely don't want [to consult commentaries]. I like reading a stack of at least 5-10 commentaries on a particular text.
- I think there are some who discourage the use of commentaries, but for me, if I've done my own study first, then the reading of Lenski or *Expositors* or Keil Delitsch is almost always a fruitful mental dialogue. I am likely to have an opinion of my own about the text, but am just as likely to see things in the text that I had missed.
- Earlier in ministry I used commentaries, but not so much lately. In fact, I probably read Edersheim (both O.T. and N.T. volumes) more than anything because he had a gift from the Spirit of taking the reader into the sandals of the lives of God's people, and always had a clear Christocentric focus.
- Truthfully, I've benefitted most from reading Luther—both his commentaries (lecture notes) and his sermons. I do this more now than I did early in my ministry. There is often a depth-of-insight in Luther that is simply not found in other writers.

Thoughts about the Treatment of Law and Gospel

- Does the law do what it must do? Does it go farther than, "How often don't we all ...?" Does it alarm? Does the nature of sin reveal itself, and does it turn us toward a solution outside ourselves? Does

my treatment of sin leave us all excuseless? Then, is the gospel explicit and fresh? I don't want my preaching in general to merely refer to the gospel that all my hearers know well, but instead to portray Christ on his cross in the place of us all in the presence of the Word of God, "Take this, this is for you." ... Predominance [of the gospel] doesn't come down to mere word count. I don't recommend it, but I can imagine one sentence of graphic gospel after a long, terrible tirade of law being unforgettable and high

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impact. If all the vividness and imagination of my treatment were spent on the way I exposed sin, and the gospel were reduced to a formula or a reference to what we already know ... well, it becomes clear that my real subject is the law, no matter how much space I gave to the gospel.

- Get specific and preach the uniqueness of each Bible text. When I hear the phrase "preach specific law," that does not mean to me that I have to mention hell and eternal death. To me, that is not "specific" but "general." Specific law addresses the malady of the text that the preacher has uncovered. The phrase "specific gospel" is a tougher matter. The cross is central to our preaching, of course. But "specific gospel" to me is—in addition to the message of the cross—a promise of God that specifically meets the need of the sinner that has been uncovered by the text. "I will never leave you or forsake you" is specific gospel that counters the sin of not trusting in God's presence and power. "My God will meet all your needs in Christ" is specific gospel that counters the lack of trust in God to provide material things. Neither of those phrases mention the death and resurrection of Christ, but they are gospel promises specific to the text. "He lived in our place, he died for us," while most certainly true, this is "general gospel" that is really applicable to any text.

Keeping the Audience in Mind

- I try to be eloquent with simple words. Only sometimes do I succeed, but I want to speak in a way that the least intellectual hearer will get what is said and the most intellectual will too—and they'll both kinda like how it was said. I try hard not to bore either group. I try to remember all the age groups and backgrounds

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listening. If I cannot speak to all of them all at once all the time, I mix it up with words for various groups that the other groups won't mind hearing. I try to speak Anglo-Saxon as much as possible.

- I [envision] the people sitting in front of me and remind myself that they will hear what they won't hear anywhere else—the saving truths of God's Word, truths that make a difference for this life and for the life to come. I also try to remind myself that they go through

Craddock says that people finish the sermon ... in the car on the way home.

the same things in their life that I go through in mine: sin, doubts, pressures from society, fear of things going wrong etc.

- Good preaching, like good art, creates conversation. [Rev. Dr. Fred] Craddock says that people finish the sermon, that is, they continue to find meaning in it—in the car on the way home.... So I want an application to be more than, "Therefore we should...." I think of the verse, "In view of God's mercy, offer yourselves as living sacrifices." We come to see life differently through the Spirit working in us by the Word; the change in the way we live is not a matter of personal willpower or resolve.



God's Treasure . . . From a Clay Jar



Illustration by Ian M. Welch/paramentics.com

Advent focuses on preparation and repentance. It presents a wonderful opportunity to preach lessons on the sinner-saint struggle that defines a Christian's daily life. To live in repentance is to live in sober and sensitive faith. The account of John the Baptist is always timely. His preaching emphasized the essential gospel—Jesus was the Christ, the fulfillment of God's promise to save.

Sermon Excerpt—Matthew 3:1-12 (ILCW-Series A, Advent 2)	Comment
Theme: John's Voice is Still Calling	
John the Baptist was headline news in Jerusalem. There was a "wild man" making noise near the Jordan River. But it was much more than his "look" that made an impact. What drew people from a wide area around Jerusalem to John was what he was saying. He was announcing that the "kingdom of heaven was near." For a people whose identity was connected to prophetic words and promises, this was critical news.	<i>The introduction might explore our contemporary interest in "off-beat" news. John the Baptist would be news in any culture at any time.</i>

<p>The Christ, whose birthday we remember annually at Christmas, has promised to return to earth again. We need to be ready. By the Word of God before us John's Voice is Still Calling to prepare hearts for Christ's coming.</p>	<p><i>The theme highlights the Advent focus on Christ's return.</i></p>
<p>John's theme was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Listen to his language. The axe is at the root. Thrown in the fire. Burning up the chaff. That is graphic judgment talk. God was using John to say, "Enough. Take stock of your hearts. You have false motives and ideas. Confess your guilt. God is warning you so that you might leave your self-made world and enter the realm of his rule." John's preaching intended to make people spiritually sensitive. That's what God does when, through his Word, he says "Repent."</p>	<p><i>Repentance demands a personal spiritual self-evaluation.</i></p>
<p>John was dealing with the most difficult of hearts. The Pharisees were self-righteous hypocrites. The Sadducees were skeptics who wanted a rational religion. Someone might ask: didn't these Jewish leaders "produce fruit"? Weren't they known for their moral lives and good works? Perhaps, but John calls them dangerous and deceptive "snakes." God desires "mercy not sacrifice." Repentance produces works of a changed attitude, not a shallow, superficial show. What grace, then, that God sent his prophet to preach repentance. God was reaching out to sinners. If salvation was in any way a product of human effort or connection, then the call to "repent" would not have been necessary.</p>	<p><i>It is important to emphasize the grace in God's call to "repent." It forces us to abandon all self-righteousness and cling to God's mercy and forgiveness.</i></p>
<p>John's voice still calls: Repent and resist self-righteousness. Repentance in its broadest sense is a complete change in mind and heart and attitude. People are powerless to do this by their own willpower. The new mind is produced by the working of God through the Word. "Repent" is a warning that sin separates from the God who gave us life. It prompts the confession, "I'm wrong and I'm sorry." But sorrow is not the goal of repentance. If confessing sin were the only part of repentance, then Christ and forgiveness and baptism would not be necessary. Then Judas, who despaired after betraying the Lord Jesus, would have been the most repentant person on earth.</p> <p>The repentant sinner also trusts in God's forgiveness. John the Baptist's preaching pointed to Christ—to the "one more powerful." Jesus would "baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit." Jesus would harvest and gather the "wheat into the barn." Words of judgment? Yes, but they are also words of hope and refuge. Christ ushered in what John calls the "kingdom of heaven." He brought, as Isaiah wrote, "comfort," and payment for all sins. Sin is washed away in Jesus' name. We are freed from sin's condemnation to struggle against our sinful natures. A heart which heeds John's voice is prepared for the "kingdom of heaven"—the rule of Christ in the heart.</p>	<p><i>Repentance is often misunderstood as being chiefly a personal change in behavior. Repentance is God's work in our hearts through his Word and Spirit. The "change of mind" is a product of the renewed sense of how we view God. God points out the error (law) and provides an entirely new and cleansed life (gospel). Jesus is both the one who is just and the one who justifies.</i></p>
<p>I thought, "Perhaps if I stepped into the pulpit dressed like John the Baptist the message of this sermon would be more powerful." Then again, maybe not. It may actually have detracted—you might have remembered the costume but not the call. It is not necessary to create an artificial setting. John's voice is still calling because it is the enduring Word of God: Produce fruit in keeping with repentance! Amen.</p>	<p><i>Believers are sinner-saints whose life revolves around repentance.</i></p>

