

The "Ideal" Sermon

By Paul Koelpin

It's time to make an admission: I do not deliberate much about homiletics. There is nothing particularly admirable (or deplorable, I suppose) about this confession. I have always thought that one of the essential features of "good preaching" is losing one's "self-consciousness"—a preacher needs to be himself, to be genuine, to preach the faith as he has come to know it without becoming formulaic or pedantic or too concerned about his "public performance." But, perhaps, this is just an excuse for my personal failing to study the craft more intensely. What, then, do I have to offer the readers of *Preach the Word*? Truthfully, this assignment has not been easy, but it has forced me, belatedly, to explore the writing and thinking of other experienced sermonizers. I want to share some of the gleanings with you in this issue.

A quotation from an essay by Klemet Preus ("The Difference between Evangelical and Lutheran Preaching in America" in *The Pieper Lectures: Preaching through the Ages*, The Luther Academy, 2004) caught my attention. Preus makes the point that Lutheran preachers begin with the text which they then apply to the people. Evangelicals, perceives Preus, "begin with people and then figure out how to impress them with the text." He highlights an assertion by Church Growth authority C. Peter Wagner who contends that the ideal sermon "is not intellectual, but emotional; it is not rational, but experiential; it is not exegetical, but allegorical; it is not doctrinal, but practical; it is not directed as much to the head as to the heart." What do you think about Wagner's perspectives?

Wagner establishes a strict dichotomy—a deficient sermon is one that focuses on explanation; a good sermon is one that concentrates on application. My initial reaction to Wagner's standard was negative. Some years ago an older member of my congregation blithely offered me, a novice preacher, some counsel: "Make me feel good, Pastor. Just make me feel good." He didn't like a sermon that was too catechetical or made extensive reference to other parts of Scripture. In short, I don't think that he liked my sermons. As much as I bristled at the not-so-veiled criticism, his words made me think about how I was

constructing my sermons. "Maybe," I thought, "he's right—at least in this—that I need to relate the text better to *his* life."

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Is the "ideal" sermon somewhere in between Wagner's extremes? A "rational" sermon often fails to connect. Christ doesn't need to be proven; Christ's life needs to be preached as the powerful truth that it is. On the other hand, sermons that are too laden with emotion have a tendency to lack "staying power"—content that plays on our human sensitivities sometimes fails to satisfy with enough substance about God's ways. I'm uncomfortable with Wagner's "allegorical"—as if the words of Scripture contain some mysterious code. At the same time, some of the most memorable sermons I've heard contained tremendous analogies—ways to think of doctrinal truths that were made plain by way of an image or story. I might be inclined to take the "not's" out of Wagner's definition and replace the "but's" with "and's"—and, perhaps, change "allegorical" to "illustrative."

When St. Paul reflected on his preaching—perhaps most memorably in his letters to the Corinthians—he explained that he preached "not in words taught by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2). He revealed later that "with the same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak . . . though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4). It was "head and heart" for Paul; he did not consciously divide the preaching of faith between one or the other. "The ideal sermon," Paul might have said, "heads for the cross and keeps Christ at the heart."

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Gleanings

Since I am self-admittedly not very self-conscious about the craft of sermonizing, I needed to engage my thinking. So I hunted through the stacks at the Martin Luther College library. There were a surprising number of books on homiletics. I selected a number of volumes—some old, some new; some Lutheran, some not—to peruse for ideas and insights. I occasionally found myself rather intrigued by perceptions and perspectives. Below are some of the gleanings—tidbits of thought that might either spark a reaction or stimulate the desire to read some more. I've supplied a question or two that may help reflect on the observations.

I do not try to make the sermon into a work of art.

I must refuse to indulge in tricks and techniques, both the emotional ones and the rhetorical ones. I must not become pedantic and schoolmasterish, nor begging, entreating, urging. I do not try to make the sermon into a work of art. I do not become unctuous and self-centered or loud and boastful. By forsaking my personal ambitions I accompany the text along its own way into the congregation and thus remain natural, balanced, compassionate, and factual. This permits the Word's almost magnetic relationship to its congregation. I do not give life to it, but it gives life to me and the congregation. The movement of the Word to its congregation is accomplished through the interpretation of it.

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It is characteristic of this kind of preaching that the preacher will not exhaust himself. The preacher should not fully exhaust himself and physically push himself to the limits. Whenever that happens there is always too much—subjectivity in play. Here we are not talking about a weaker subjective participation on my part, but about a completely different kind of participation, a humble awareness of the Word and a belief in the power of the Word itself to make its own way.

A certain distance must remain between the actual subject of the Word and myself. In texts of wrath, for example, I am not the one who is angry. God is. God converts, not I. It is as if I read a letter which another has written. I report factually what another says. It is really a higher degree of participation which allows one's own subjectivity to die. . . . When the sermon is regarded as an interpretation, then the involvement of the preacher is that of a man who puts himself to death for the sake of the Word, who dies to his own will and only wishes to be the handservant of God. He wants only what the Word itself wants. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Worldly Preaching*, New York: Thomas Nelson, 1975 – pp. 138-139)

- Agree/Disagree: Bonhoeffer is too emphatic about his disregard for the art of rhetoric as applied to the sermon.
- How does the Scripture's instruction about the power of the Word shape the sermon-writing process?

Personality plays a role in preaching

If a preacher is not a man of his age, in sympathy with its spirit, his preaching fails. He wonders that the truth has grown so powerless. But it is not the truth that has failed. It is the other element, the person. That is the reason why sometimes the old preacher finds his well-known power gone, and complains that while he is still in his vigor people are looking to younger men for the work which they once delighted to demand of him. . . . It is in the poise and proportion of these two elements of preaching [truth and personality] that we secure the true relation between independence and adaptation in the preacher's character. (Phillips Brooks in *Lectures on Preaching* (1877), Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978, pp. 29-30)

- How does a pastor's preaching change over the years of his ministry?
- What does it mean to be "in sympathy with the spirit" of the times?

Preaching must convey theological depth

A sermon which does not seriously seek to explore or communicate the hidden richness of God is shallow and superficial, however effectively it may be spoken. . . . Preaching is conveying the theological depth of God's reconciling act in Christ. We want people to hear this message, to trust this message, to respond to its truth.

So the sermon is *given* to us in its raw material in the Scriptures and is mediated through the Holy Spirit. The message addressed to the *conscience* is given a point of entry by the use of the emotions. The message to the *mind* is given depth by its theological frame of reference and its historical base. (Arndt L. Halvorson in *Authentic Preaching*, Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing, 1982, pp. 41-42)

- What are the characteristics of "theological depth" as applied to a sermon?
- Does Halvorson's perspective put too much pressure on the preacher?

On storytelling

Everyone loves a good story and preachers need to tell more of them. Still, the Lutheran way does limit their use. . . . This is an area of homiletics where all that glitters is not gold and Lutherans, hopefully, have not spoken their last word on the matter. Perhaps the Lutheran approach to storytelling could be an appreciation

of any narrative which aids the listener in applying either Law or Gospel to himself. The parables indict when applied correctly. Narrative can also make the hearer fully realize and trust that the forgiveness of sins is “pro me.” Our illustrations, however, do nothing to make the Gospel more powerful, more appealing, more exciting, more experience-able, or more necessary. (Klemet Preus, “The Difference between Evangelical and Lutheran Preaching in America” in *The Pieper Lectures: Preaching through the Ages*, The Luther Academy, 2004, p. 121)

- Is there a distinctly “Lutheran approach” to storytelling?
- What makes a story or illustration an effective part of the sermon?
- What are the limitations of stories or illustrations?

“Better”

In all sermon construction the sum and substance of homiletics amount to what is contained in this little word “better.” Choice after choice presents itself to the preacher, and in every case he

should take what is “better.” And the aggregate of these choices, a score, a hundred of them, constitutes homiletical excellence. The best sermon is therefore the one which in every alternative adopts that which is better. . . . It is better to have arrangement than mere loose material; better to have a subject than no subject at all; better to have a real theme than a mere subject; better to have a true division of the theme than a haphazard cutting up of material. . . . It is better to have homogeneous material than heterogeneous; it is better to organize this material than to work it in loosely; it is better to focus this material than just to string it out. Always and always it is the *better* that counts. (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Sermon: Its Homiletical Construction*, p. 62-63)

- How does the preacher decide what is “better”?
- When is a sermon “good enough”?



God’s Treasure . . . From a Clay Jar

Transfiguration is a pivotal Sunday of the church year, even as it was a decisive moment in the lives of the disciples who had this “mountaintop experience.” Jesus allowed this glimpse of glory to keep the cross in perspective. The message is all confidence . . . all comfort . . . all Christ. This epistle lesson offers the preacher an excellent opportunity to ponder Christ’s power from Peter’s “human” point of view.

<p>Sermon Excerpt – (ILCW-Series A, Transfiguration) 2 Peter 1:16-19</p> <p>Theme: Confidence Before the Cross</p>	<p>Comment</p>
<p>It was important for Peter personally to recall the transfiguration scene that he witnessed with his own eyes. Frequently his personal sin and weakness got the best of him. He walked briefly on the water, until he became too self-conscious and had to cry out, “Lord, save me.” To brash Peter Jesus said: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.” Peter even denied that he knew Jesus shortly before his Lord was led off to die. Selfish weakness, even bold denial—that sounds a lot like the sinful natures with which you and I struggle. But the resurrected Jesus did not leave Peter in despair. He came personally to him and said: “Peter, feed my sheep. And follow me.” Peter became a bold confessor of gospel truth and fulfillment. He became a powerful proclaimer of what he had seen and heard.</p>	<p><i>Peter’s weaknesses illustrate well our personal human selfishness. So also Peter’s reflection on the transfiguration event emphasizes its power and truth for believers.</i></p>
<p>Together with James and John, Peter saw the glory of Jesus revealed in the transfiguration. Critics will claim that this scene was just powerful science fiction. Like special effects in a movie—blazing eyes and gleaming white light. To reason it does appear unreal and improbable. But this was gospel truth. That is why Peter boldly asserts: “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.”</p>	<p><i>Be a storyteller! Create the wonder of the scene. Emphasize its truth and its impact.</i></p>

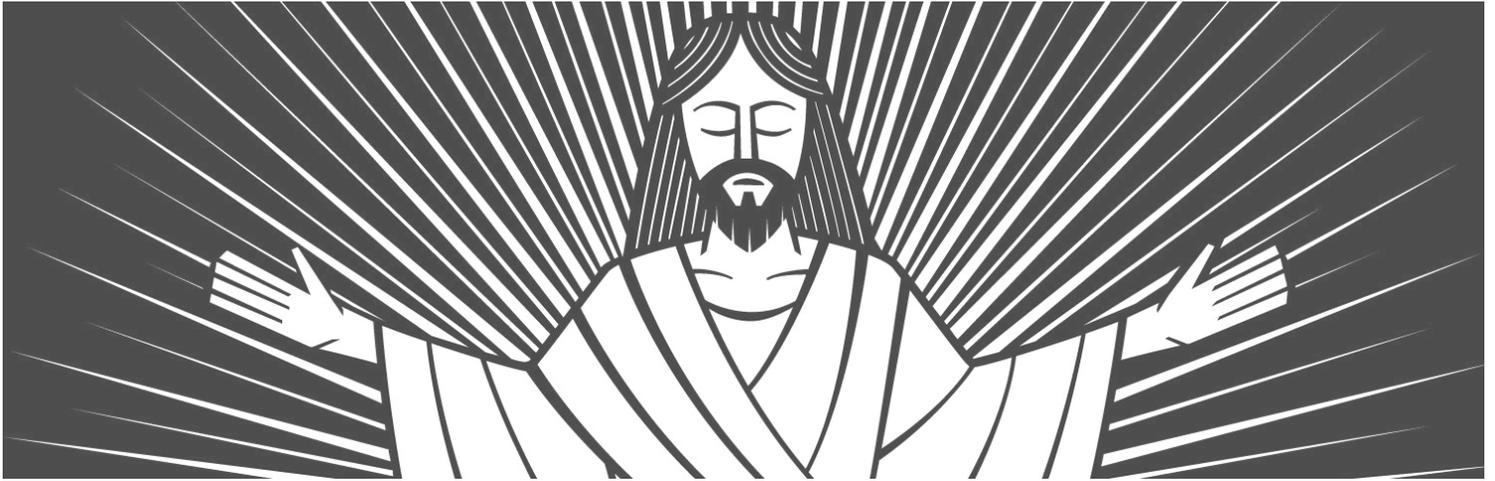


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<p>The transfiguration miracle is the highlight of Epiphany—always the Sunday before the season of Lent begins. Soon we will hear the cruel mocking, the sound of scourging, the pounding of nails and gasping breath. We need to know that what happened to Jesus as he was tried and condemned was part of God’s plan. An unjust end was the only way a perfect life could be cut short. The transfiguration scene gives us Confidence Before the Cross. Jesus was not a victim of circumstances, or a political pawn caught in a Roman-Jewish chess game. There was grace behind Jesus’ suffering and death. The writer to the Hebrews declares: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame” (12:2).</p>	<p><i>Transfiguration was a lesson in grace. God cares that his believers know that he has the power to fulfill his promises.</i></p>
<p>On the mountain God’s heavenly voice spoke familiar words: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” The message was almost identical to what the Father said at Jesus’ baptism. With Jesus’ earthly ministry nearing its end, God was explaining, “Jesus has been completely obedient. He has taken your place and become your Savior. You will see him humbled and despised, but hang on to this glimpse of glory. He will conquer. Listen carefully to the wisdom of the gospel that he communicates to you. Do not doubt. Don’t ignore or change his words. This truth changes your life so that you will live eternally.”</p>	<p><i>Explore and explain the truth of the gospel sermon preached by the Father.</i></p>
<p>There is no difference: Old Testament and New Testament believers are saved in the same way—by faith in the gospel. While Moses and Elijah trusted the promises of salvation, Peter explains, “We have the word of the prophets made more certain.” What do you think that Moses and Elijah were talking about? Luke explains in his account: “[Moses and Elijah] spoke about [Jesus’] departure which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.” Transfiguration Sunday helps to set the stage so we can have Confidence Before the Cross.</p>	<p><i>Why were Moses and Elijah there? God operates in time to promise and fulfill, but the way of salvation (faith) is always the same.</i></p>
<p>Believe it: Everything Peter saw and heard is absolutely true. Transfiguration truth is gospel truth—sure and certain good news for each and every one of us. Peter would find the modern attacks on the Bible disappointing and even galling. It is, however, a popular notion that the Scripture is merely a product of human imagination—an edited compilation of myths. Satan still tempts by questioning, “Did God really say?” Even years after the event Peter appeals to the truth with excitement and energy. Renewed in the vision of the transfigured Christ, we are ready to come down from the mountaintop and meditate this Lent. Amen.</p>	<p><i>The Bible’s record is true, accurate and certain—an eyewitness account.</i></p>