

PREACH

the Word

Vol. 2 No. 1

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Single Focus for Each New Issue of *Preach the Word*

With this issue of *Preach The Word* I begin a one year assignment as editor. I am both honored and awed by the responsibility—honored by the trust the Commission on Worship has in me, awed by several considerations, not the least of which is the fact that I follow John Jeske as editor. I feel a bit like the batter who steps up to the plate in the top of the 9th just after the designated hitter has cleared the bases with a home run that put our team up by two.

You can look for some change in the next six issues. I plan to incorporate some of the suggestions that our readers had submitted during the past year. In addition, each issue will focus on one aspect of preaching the Word. Each issue will also include input that I solicit from others. This issue will emphasize the importance of preaching timely sermons.

Volume 1 of *Preach The Word* has generated a positive response from appreciative WELS preachers. My hope and prayer is that Volume 2 will continue to be a source of encouragement and practical help to all of you. May the Holy Spirit use this modest publication to make you a better practitioner of the art of preaching the Word.

Joel Gerlach



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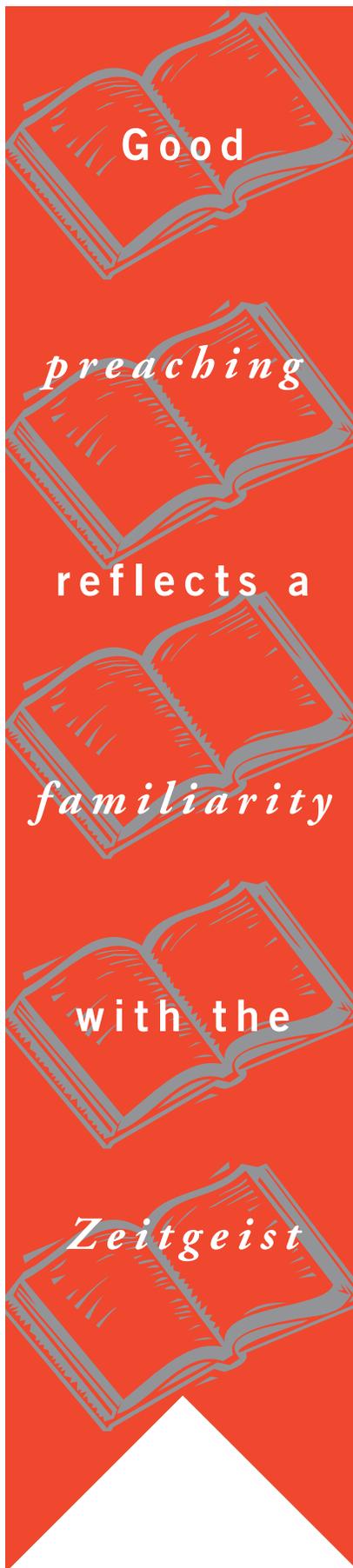
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Timely Preaching

In Romans 13 St. Paul underscores the importance of “understanding the present time” (*kairos*). He doesn’t say that in the context of sermon preparation and delivery. But the context (“love one another”) is broad enough to include our preaching.

Good preaching must always be timely preaching. It must be *zeitgemaesz*, my homiletics professor, Adelbert Schaller, used to say. Good preaching will reflect that we have an understanding of the times in which we live, a familiarity with the *Zeitgeist*.

Stalwarts like Luther, Walther, August Pieper, and John Schaller were great preachers. They preached timely sermons, but not for our times. Former DMLC president, Carl Schweppe, was an outstanding preacher. His daughter has compiled a book of his sermons entitled *Grace and Peace*. When I read Schweppe’s sermons, I can still hear his rich, stentorian voice. Great as his sermons were, you wouldn’t be preaching a good sermon if you memorized and delivered one of his. It would be scripturally sound, a masterpiece of oral communication (especially if you could reproduce his distinct cadences). But it wouldn’t be timely.

Several years ago a former student of mine, Siegfried Koehne, now a pastor in South Africa, wrote and asked if I would be willing to send him selected copies of my sermons that lay readers could use at outpost preaching stations. After rereading several, I wrote to him and explained that sermons I preached in Santa Barbara and Wauwatosa were not appropriate to South Africa. References to current events and to our culture would mean nothing to South Africans. They were timely sermons here, but not there.

Sometimes timely sermons come naturally. At other times they require substantial effort. The Sunday after a tornado destroyed one third of St. Peter, Minnesota, including the WELS church, school and a parsonage, the pastor at St. Peter Lutheran Church did not have to search for something timely to say. As you prepare next Sunday’s sermon, you will doubtlessly have to work much harder to make it timely.

What makes a sermon timely? It’s timely if it deals with issues and interests that have been on people’s minds and hearts in recent weeks. It’s timely if it reveals that you know what’s going on in the real world, that you can discern the times, and that you can evaluate trends such as political correctness and multiculturalism in the light of God’s truth.

Not only must you have a degree of familiarity with the spirit of the times. You must also know your own people. You must be familiar with their social life and their intellectual life. Congregations differ from each other. I went from a little old mining town in the west to cosmopolitan Orange County, California, in the heyday of the space age. Sermons that were timely in Bisbee, Arizona, would not have been timely in Garden Grove, California.

Timely sermons have a ring of relevance about them. We preach to people in the toils and tensions of daily life. Our words need to reflect an understanding of those toils and tensions if God’s Word from the pulpit to his people is to be meaningful and applicable to their circumstances.

Take the time necessary to make your sermons timely.

What Others Have Said About Timely Sermons

The preacher must know the age in which he lives—its ruling ideas and underlying tendencies, its problems and needs, its attainments and shortcomings, and how they react upon the inner life of his contemporaries . . . The preacher's duty is to make a thorough study of his people, in their industrial and educational conditions, their political and social tendencies, their spiritual attainments and aspirations, their literature and life, so that he may exert upon them, in the course of his ministry, a directing and correcting influence. —M. Reu; *Homiletics*, pp. 132-133. 1924

There is a particular character to the condition of those to whom the preacher speaks. He addresses himself to people in a particular age, in a particular culture, in a particular society. Indeed, he addresses himself to people in a particular community. A sermon preached in Gargunnoch or Poughkeepsie should somehow be subtly different from a sermon preached in Glasgow or Pittsburgh. Every sermon should acquire a certain timbre from the congregational context within which it is delivered. It should have localised resonance . . . Only if the preacher lives fully in his time and place can

he hope to preach with “earthy” relevance to those who belong to that time and place.

—J. Miller Stewart; *Effective Preaching*, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 36 No 2:237. 1983

Have special files in the proper months for sermons for special days, Christmas, Easter and patriotic occasions. Each such season should produce some good ideas you can file away for use next year. You always want to be on the alert for timely topics and matters of special interest—books and movies and plays as well as current events that call for special attention . . .

You will find that you can render a real service when you take things of current interest that your people are thinking and talking about and relate them to the work of the Kingdom or show what the gospel means in such situations. You start with people where they are and bring a message they will never forget as you lead them where they ought to go.

—Theodore Adams; *Preaching with Purpose and Power*, p 160. 1982

An Example

This sermon was preached when the movie *Everest* was showing in IMAX theaters across the country.

“*Onward and Upward*,” a sermon by Pastor Jon Buchholz, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Des Moines, Wash. March 29, 1998.

Text: *Philippians 3:8-14* (excerpts)

Anyone of you who has ever climbed a mountain, be it a big mountain like Ranier or something smaller like Mt. Si or even Tiger Mountain—or even if you've just been out hiking on a trail that has some “up” to it, you can relate to what the Apostle Paul is saying in *Philippians*. You get to the point where you're huffing and puffing, the sweat is pouring down your back, the pack you're carrying feels like it's full of lead, your muscles ache, your lungs are crying for air, and you look up ahead of you . . . and you're still not even close. You feel like saying, “I can't do it,” and you want to just throw your load down, sit down, and quit in disgust. But then the little voice inside you kicks in and overrules your body, and you say, “No, I'm going to keep on going. Onward and upward.” And you pick up your feet again, and you put one foot in front of the other, because you can see the goal, and you're willing to endure whatever pain it takes to reach the objective.

The Christian life is such a struggle. The goal is ahead of us; the prize is

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heaven, an eternity with Jesus. But countless demons grasp at us along the way, trying to hold us back. Our sins and our past become onerous burdens that drag us down. The world around us entices us with its attractions and seductions and invites us to lounge around in its pleasures and forget about our journey onward and upward. Our life here is a constant struggle to cast off sin, to keep our focus, to keep our eyes on our goal. Nobody ever said it would be easy. Jesus himself said that the road to life is narrow and difficult, and few people find it. It is the path of much trial and tribulation that leads to heaven.

Paul the apostle knew all about the journey onward and upward . . .

From the conclusion: When a climber takes the last step that puts him on top of the mountain, his heartbeat slows, he catches his breath, his muscles rest, and very quickly he forgets all the pain and struggle that were part of his climb to reach the goal. He's caught up by the beauty of the sweeping panorama all around him.

Dear Christian friends, very soon our struggle will be behind us. All the pain, the heartache, the sin, the sorrow, the loss, the hardship that are part of this earthly existence—very soon they'll all be behind us, past and forgotten. And in their place we'll enjoy the privilege of gazing upon the beauty of our Savior, eating and drinking and celebrating the marriage feast of the bridegroom Christ and his Church, a celebration that will last for all eternity. That's the goal we aspire to. In Christ, press on toward that goal. Onward and upward. Amen.



four

**“The only thing in God’s economy
that can ever take the place of preaching is better preaching.**

Any preacher is capable of that.

Not of good preaching.

Good preaching may be quite beyond us.

But better preaching.

That is beyond none of us.”

(Paul Scherer in *For We Have This Treasure* p. 22)

Worth Quoting?

*“A saint is a dead sinner,
revised and edited.”*

Dr. Norman Madson
in a chapel sermon at
Bethany Lutheran College

*“The church is the body of
Christ, not his statue.”*

*“Preachers have to turn
listeners’ ears into eyes and
make them see the Invisible
if they are to be grasped
and moved by Him.”*

Interpreter’s Bible 5:435

*“The curious mixture of
humility (in the preacher’s
recognition of his own
shortcomings) and pride
(as the ambassador of God)
is as much a part of pulpit
rhetoric, in its widest sense,
as the use of the voice.”*

P.E. Sangster,
Homiletics, p. 28