

PREACH

the Word

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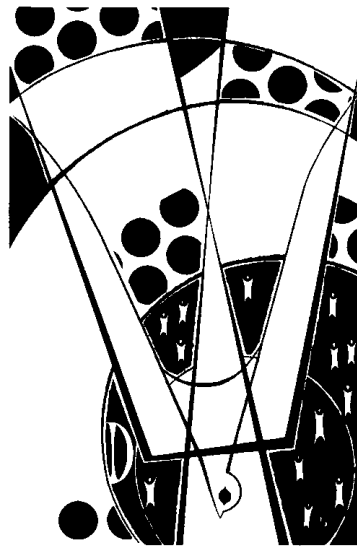
With Thanks for Good Preaching

by David Prillwitz

*Preach you the Word and plant it home
To those who like or like it not,
The Word that shall endure and stand
When flow'rs and mortals are forgot.*

Martin H. Franzmann - CW544:1

As a member of the Commission on Worship, I heard pleas received from pastors and parishes for help with preaching. As a medical speech and language pathologist with a graduate degree in the liberal arts and experience in public speaking, I pondered a few, potentially fresh perspectives. As a member at four parishes in my lifetime, I reflected on various sermons and preachers. I read "Lutheran" sermons in books and on the Internet. I thought of the non-Lutheran sermons I have heard, their strong and weak aspects. I even surveyed a collection of reprinted articles on effective communication. I mused, but I failed to find the specific insights I desired to share with you in this article.



I am drawn to the Lutheran preacher who uses his own genuine and believable mannerisms of speech to communicate the terror of the law and peace of the gospel in a natural extension of himself, even passionate and intimate when needed for emphasis.

Then it hit me. Last year I was privileged to mark my twenty-five years of ministry as a parish musician. Not only had I heard numerous Sunday and midweek sermons, but also "sermonettes," homilies, and devotions, plus wedding, funeral, anniversary, baptism, dedication, and installation/ordination sermons. And many I heard more than once. Some sermons were not as good

Preacher to Preacher

Our guest writers for this issue are two men who serve on the Commission on Worship, Philip Becker and David Prillwitz. Both have listened to many sermons from WELS preachers. I asked them to reflect on the preaching they have heard over the years and make comments or suggestions. Our thanks to both these men for their willingness to respond to this request. I've known Phil and Dave for many years and have profited from their observations and input on many different issues.

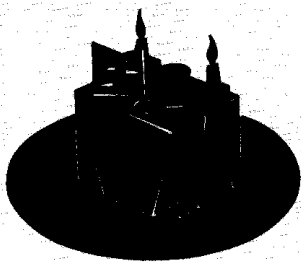
Another person from whom I learned much was my father-in-law, for many years a WELS district president. He once made the comment about a certain pastor which I've never forgotten. He said of the man: "He does the liturgy well."

Now my father-in-law was in no way "high church". He characterized the long, drawn out end to a certain service we attended together as "zoph" (pigtail). He was quite critical of some liturgical portions of *The Lutheran Hymnal*. He valued preaching highly. Yet he commented favorably on the value of doing the liturgy well.

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I served my vicar year under his tutelage. I'll never forget coming into the office on Monday morning after preaching there for the first time. He asked me to step into the church. I wondered what kind of lecture I was going to get. He pointed up to the hymn board and said: "Next time you preach, make sure the hymn numbers are lined up straight." That's all he said.

The point is: worship is more than preaching. Worship is doing the liturgy well. Worship is reading well. Worship is picking good hymns. It's even important to have the hymn numbers look right and the building properly ventilated.

Recently I attended a Roman Catholic funeral service. It was not difficult to spot false theology. But one could not but be impressed with the way in which the presider conducted the service.

He did the liturgy well and with dignity. He was not hurried. His reading was precise and easily understood. You felt that his heart was in what he was saying.

Let's work hard to preach as best we can. Let's also work hard at doing the liturgy well.

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as others. Yet in thinking about my life-long experience of hearing sermons, I am moved to give thanks for so much good preaching, preaching that clearly revealed and articulated the solemn demands of God's law and the perfect joy of our salvation in Christ.

That said, what makes preaching "good" to our members? No doubt there are preachers—and presiding ministers, organists, choir directors—who must become better at helping the eyes and ears in the pews. To me, a preacher's understanding of the sermon as worship—as part of the weekly proclamation and praise of a parish—does much to frame a sermon as "good." The discipline to carefully prepare and edit sermons well in advance of each Lord's Day makes for quality and clarity. Frequent references to my Baptism and Holy Communion, the Gospel in Word and Sacraments, and the annual pilgrimage through the Christian Year enhance my listening and give me helpful context. And, perhaps not surprisingly, I am drawn to the Lutheran preacher who uses his own genuine and believable mannerisms of speech to communicate the terror of the law and peace of the gospel in a natural extension of himself, even passionate and intimate when needed for emphasis.

Then, thanks to God and thanks for preachers who plant the Word home in these gray and latter days! May the Harvest-Lord of the Church watch and tend your preaching and our hearing as he leads us to his eternal joy.

David Prillwitz, a member of Grace Lutheran in Portland, Oregon, regularly serves as an organist, choir director, and coordinator for worship, and is a member of the WELS Commission on Worship.



Reflections on Preaching from the Listener

by Philip Becker

Most of us who listen to the Word humbly acknowledge that we fail to till the soil of our hearts to receive best the seed of the Word. We fall prey to distractions, lapses of attention, and sometimes hardness of heart. We need you who are preachers to help us hear. Here are some suggestions that might help us receive the Word.

Can your sermons touch each of us individually even though you are speaking to a group? It is easy to speak of general truths in broad terms: the infinite beauty of creation, the impossibility of keeping God's law, the infinite love of God. It is harder to apply them to each of us personally.

Please prepare the reading of the Sunday lessons with the same care with which you prepare your sermon. Read with sensitivity to the language, at a pace which allows the hearer to understand, with attention to phrase and sentence rhythm and inflection, and with appropriate pauses. Let these

readings stand with a minimum of introduction and interpretation, perhaps just a sentence to put a title on the reading.

When you choose the subject of your sermon, know that we want to hear you proclaim the whole Word of God, not just what is topical or thematic, not just what is pleasant or unpleasant to hear.

Can your sermons touch each of us individually even though you are speaking to a group? It is easy to speak of general truths in broad terms: the infinite beauty of creation, the impossibility of keeping God's law, the infinite love of God. It is harder to apply them to each of us personally. Our response will start if each individual

feels that you are talking to me. Let the law accuse me of my sins. Let God's love embrace me. Perhaps there is a place, even though it might be uncomfortable, to rest your gaze on individuals for a sentence or two, rather than scanning the hearers.

Help us follow all the words and thoughts you prepare for a sermon. Reduce the number of important points so they can be the stars in your sermon. Choose points that build on one another to a conclusion, rather than those only related to the theme. Use transitions and repetitions for effect and in case we miss a few words, for a sermon needs a higher level of thought for understanding than does conversation. If you do all

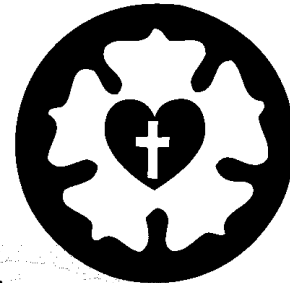
those things, 20 minutes is all we can absorb with understanding. Your summary point will have best effect at minute 18.

Last, let your passion for God's Word be seen in your expression, your emotions, your intensity. We will surely catch it.

Phil Becker is a member at St. Paul Lutheran in Amherst NH where he serves as president, organist, and choir director. He has served on the councils of three other congregations in the North Atlantic District and is currently a member of the Commission on Worship. He is employed as program manager/engineer for supercomputers at a major computer company.



Martin Luther loved to emphasize the importance of proclaiming the Word of God orally. He said, for example, in an Epiphany Day sermon: "What is the star? It is none other than the new light, preaching and the Gospel, oral and public



preaching. Christ has two witnesses to his birth and his realm. The one is Scripture, the word comprehended in the letters of the alphabet. The other is the voice or the words proclaimed by mouth....In the New Testament, preaching must be done orally and publicly, with the living voice, to produce in speech and hearing what prior to this lay hidden in the letter and in secret vision. For the New Testament is nothing but an uncovering and a revelation of the Old Testament . . . That is why Christ did not write his doctrine himself, as Moses did his, but transmitted it orally, and also commanded that it should be orally continued giving no command that it should be written....So it is not at all in keeping with the New Testament to write books on Christian doctrine. Rather in all places there should be fine, goodly, learned, spiritual, diligent preachers without books, who extract the living Word from the old Scripture and unceasingly inculcate it into the people, just as the apostles did. For before they wrote, they first of all preached to the people by word of mouth and converted them, and this was their real apostolic and New Testament work (LW52:205f)."

More of Luther:

Victory belongs to the one who stammers the truth, not to the eloquent liar.

God created the world out of nothing. As long as you are not yet nothing, God cannot make something of you.

When you begin to cease wishing to become better, you cease to be good. (LW25:434; quoting Bernard)

To stand still on the way to God is to retrogress, and to advance is always a matter of beginning anew. (LW25:478)

No one conquers the devil by arguing with him. (LW10:182)

Preaching Preview

During the months of July and August, there are several opportunities to preach a series of sermons from the Year B readings. The Gospels for Pentecost 2-9 are all from Mark 2-6. Here is a chance to focus on Christ's ministry among his people. He comes into conflict with his opponents; he teaches with parables; he calms the sea, brings a dead girl back to life, and feeds the 5,000. Portray Christ in action.

On the next five Sundays the Gospels are all from John 6. Be aware that the Gospels for Pentecost 9 and 10 report the same event. On the latter Sunday one might focus on John's note that Jesus realized the crowd was about to take him by force to make him king. The readings from John 6 present an opportunity for a series on Jesus, the Bread of Life.

The second lessons are from Second Corinthians and Ephesians. There are eight consecutive readings from Ephesians (Pentecost 8-15). Here is a chance to unfold this very important letter which in a general way presents our Christian faith and life with special emphasis on the grace of God.

If you are one who would prefer to preach a series not related to the lectionary, this is the time of the year to do it. Sermons on the parts of the Catechism are beneficial and appreciated by our people. One can also use the order of service or a series of hymns as the basis for a series.

The October 1999 issue of the *Concordia Journal* had a most interesting article by Robert Kolb on the series of sermons which Luther preached on the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. In fact between 1528 (the year he began work on both catechisms) and 1539 he preached no

less than five series of sermons on Baptism. All five series fell in the Epiphany season when the Baptism of Christ is remembered.

The article divides the content of Luther's sermons into five sections: What is Baptism?, God Acts in Baptism, God's Baptismal Word Is Sure, Baptism Saves, and Against False Views of the Sacrament. Luther was obviously contending against many false teachings about Baptism in his day. But is the same not true also today? A series of sermons on Baptism might include going through the service of Holy Baptism in the hymnal.

None of the minor festivals of the Church Year fall on a Sunday during July and August. There is, however, one significant day in our national calendar to which one might want to give special emphasis: July 4th. *Christian Worship: Manual* (page 472) includes a proper for "Nation".

Romans 13:1-7 is the second lesson and a fine text for a sermon about government. One can point out that there was nothing Christian about the Caesar in Rome. He was not freely elected. None of the Christians there voted for him. Yet the word stands: "everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities."

One hears much discontent expressed about government. Headlines like this are common: "Poll finds political disenchantment". The word "dirty" seems to go well with politics. People don't like to pay taxes because they think their money is wasted. Our people need the reminder that government is God's institution for our good. It was in Paul's day and is today.

PTW Video for Professional Growth

The Preach the Word committee has worked for two years to prepare videotapes of WELS preachers along with interviews and critiques. The first video—a trial balloon—will be distributed this summer. We encourage you to view it not only as a tool for professional growth but also to offer your feedback. Do you want more videos? Do you have suggestions for improvements?

In both interviews and critiques you will notice emphasis on explicit Law and Gospel. John Jeske states, "In a quarter century of student sermons, specific Law and Gospel were pretty slim." Mature preachers also continue to face the challenge of rightly dividing and rightly preaching Law and Gospel. Luther, Walther, and others call this the most difficult art! This is just one of many valuable emphases in PTW's first video.

A video of other preachers, of course, doesn't suggest that you imitate them.

And yet most of us, who rarely hear other preachers, still can gain insights. The interviews allow us to get into another preacher's mind and habits. Preached sermons show the fruit of one man's effort in his most visible role.

Anticipating the release of PTW's first video we again thank AAL for a generous grant to help make the video possible.

Bryan Gerlach

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