

PREACH

the Word

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PREACHING THE EPISTLES *By Daniel N. Balge*



Quickly, name a spiritual hazard with which many 21st-century Christians contend, but which did not present a temptation to any first-century believer. Internet porn? Sure, fiber-optic cable had yet to snake its way into downtown Ephesus, but sacramental prostitution at Diana's temple offered

plenty of other and similar distraction. Lax and lapsing societal parameters for sexual behavior? Check with the first Christians in Rome. Worship at the altar of tolerance—my god's okay; your god's okay? Visit Athens, 60-ish A.D., and maybe find an actual altar to Tolerance. Infighting among groups of Christians? Been-there-done-that for the Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and Christ cliques in Corinth. Merchants of a better revelation, a bigger knowledge, one with a little more zip for the *Zeitgeist*? John had to warn the “chosen lady and her children” not to let them cross their threshold. Reliance on one's own dogged determination and rugged energy to keep things right between oneself and God? Paul wrote timely words to the Galatian Christians on that timeless problem. Fellow Christians who disappoint, who give up the habit of meeting together, who even desert when we need them most? Our Hebrew fathers and mothers in the faith were pained by attendance figures, and Demas refused to attend Paul in his last days.

Now, quickly, name a spiritual blessing which is ours, but which was not available to the Christians of the first generation. There is not one of those either. Epistle writers speak of praying for and being prayed for. The words and deeds of their fellow Christians encouraged them mightily. They rejoiced in the companionship, comradeship, and fellowship of their co-workers and siblings in the Lord. We see on their pages the contributions of individuals, ministry teams, congregations, and groups of congregations.

We read of outreach and offerings. We watch them thankfully celebrate their suffering for the Lord. Time and again they turn the hearts of their readers and their own hearts to the truth of the gospel, to “Christ Jesus, raised from the dead, descended from David,” to the one “who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine,” never to themselves, but always “to Christ and him crucified.” Like their Old Testament counterparts, they “longed for a better country” with the confidence that only grace can give. Across two millennia we rejoice with those first-century Christians over the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those touched by the gospel.

It is particularly the epistles that bring home to the reader the timelessness of the believer's experience in this world. The epistles record the application of law and gospel to the life of the Church (then and now), to individuals and to congregations. The epistles answer the broad question of how I am in my time and my place to live my faith in my living Lord. And whatever the differences between the first century A.D. and our own, between Jewish or Gentile culture in the middle years of the Roman Empire and whatever culture(s) in which we are privileged to share the good news, whatever makes our generation and location supposedly unique, these things are overwhelmed by the sameness of the ancients' experience with ours, with the problems we face, the challenges we meet, the questions we ask, and the answers we need.

It is a vital responsibility of the preacher of an epistolary text to bring this out. The word “epistle” can distract from that task, because of the elevated connotation “epistle” has acquired. These letters were written in a form—address/identification of sender, address/identification of recipient, opening salutations, body, final greetings, closing—that the first-century denizen of the Greco-Roman world knew well. It was the way real people wrote to each other to record real events, to handle real business, to deal with real life. The Holy Spirit simply consecrated an everyday vessel of communication for sacred use. The better

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PREACHING THE WORD AT THE BEDSIDE *LeRoy H. Lothert*

When I began my ministry almost 50 years ago, I was most uncomfortable making hospital and shut-in calls. By the time I finished my ministry in 1998 as chaplain for our synod at Rochester, MN, it was my most gratifying ministry. Something changed during these years to make me comfortable at the bedside. I suppose it was maturity and experience—and prayer.

It is our privilege to bring the Word of God to people at critical times in their lives. We come as their shepherd to care for their spiritual needs, to comfort, to bring assurance of forgiveness through their Savior, to bring real peace only the Lord has for them. In 1952 Pastor Arnold Schroeder, our respected institutional chaplain in the Milwaukee area, in a lecture at the Seminary, said, “The only thing effective is the Word of God. That alone will bring results. We sow or preach the Word. God will use it in his own effective way. Nothing we do will accomplish this, such as presenting it in a clever way.”

What shall I use from the Bible? I am sure you have a storehouse of passages that you use for various situations. Following are some situations with one of many passages in parentheses that I often used in that situation. Before surgery (Psalm 121), after surgery (Psalm 103:1-5), maternity (Isaiah 43:1), children (Isaiah 40:11), youth (Proverbs 3:1-6), elderly (Isaiah 46:4 or Psalm 90 select verses), seasonal (Christmas, Lent, Easter, etc), worry (Matthew 6:25-34), fear (Isaiah 41:10 and 13), patience (Psalm 27 select verses, especially 13-14), and sorrow and depression (Psalm 42:1-5). Then there are all the passages that speak about faith and what Christ has done for our salvation. What a powerful message for the sick—and all of us—in Romans 8:31-39! Don't neglect the Psalms. What a mountain of truth in the opening verses of Psalm 62:1-2, not only at the sickbed but even when dealing with the delinquent or unchurched. “My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.” What comfort and rest King David assures us we have!

Do not overlook using a lesson from the previous Sunday's Scripture lessons. Many a shut-in may appreciate hearing a message from one of these lessons. In my chaplaincy work where I served people in the hospital for weeks at a time (in one case for 9 months), I could not be repeating a devotion every few weeks. By using a Scripture lesson from the previous Sunday, I always had something fresh for my devotion with that person. Sometimes it is good to use familiar verses. The elderly and critically ill may appreciate hearing again John 3:16 or Ephesians 2:8-9.

I found it most beneficial in my devotion to read a phrase or verse and then comment on it, and then proceed on to the next verse. Do not be aloof at the bedside, but speak in a concerned,



loving, emphatic, and yes, even empathic way. Have a heartfelt gospel-motivated concern for the person to whom you are ministering. Make sure the gospel message of what Christ has done for their salvation is clearly presented and concludes your message. Only the gospel can bring comfort and peace to the individual. Be cheerful and have a positive attitude at the bedside. It is not time for you to air your gripes or complain about your problems.

Close the devotion with an *ex corde* prayer, the Lord's Prayer, and the benediction. Some elderly people may appreciate the Lord's Prayer in German. As for the *ex corde* prayer—when I began my ministry, that was not my *forté*. Make sure that it is fresh and filled with substance. I have heard too many *ex corde* prayers where you know exactly what the next line is going to be because you have heard it so often. Bring in the thoughts from your devotion. That will emphasize those truths and will hopefully make them more meaningful and important to the person. In our prayers we appeal to God to restore the health of the person but leave it in his hands. “My times are in your hands.” Do not back yourself into a corner by stating that the person will recover. We don't know what plans God has for that person or what crosses he/she will have to bear for the rest of his/her life.

The devotion should not be lengthy. Ten minutes is an average time. Make it even shorter and to the point if the situation is critical and the staff is there to care for the patient. When the devotion is over, it is time to leave. Do not overstay your welcome. Then the people you serve will look forward to your coming back with another message from the Word of God.

Let us briefly touch on being at the death bed. My first time at a death bed was in a home of a grand old lady. It was a very uneasy experience which I had difficulty handling. In my chaplaincy ministry at Rochester a patient died in the hospital about once a month, and I was not always present.

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those who gather with us around the Word appreciate that, the better they will apply that Word in their own real lives.

So delve into commentaries that take pains to paint the scene in which a text resides. Be glad for too much detail, so that you can prune what you've gleaned to a compact and vivid snapshot of how it was then and how that's the way it is now too. Surprise your hearers with the familiar—familiar hopes, fears, sins, emotions, joys, and plans—the familiar human condition. Catch their attention with the same-old-same-new. Show how the same Law applied and applies. Remind them of the Savior who is the same then, now, and forever.

As you prepare to preach, appreciate the care with which the inspired letter writers expressed themselves—and that they did so in a language still praised and often borrowed for its precision. Frequently they were striving to summarize in a word or a phrase what Jesus' obedient life, innocent death, and triumphant resurrection meant for the believer. When they spoke of redemption, justice, righteousness, grace, forgiveness, pardon, law, crime, iniquity, sin, trespass, holiness, sacrifice, obedience, service, salvation, και πολλα αλλα, they—guided by the Spirit—reached for words that had (and still have extant) a history in the culture from which they were loaned for sacred use. Thus it is useful to use a thicker dictionary, better yet a volume or volumes that offer careful word studies. Understand an etymology, but don't grant it more dignity than it deserves. Trace a history of usage, being careful to pinpoint a usage when the Spirit used it. Touch upon English derivatives, but choose wisely between what illustrates and what frustrates your intended point, e.g. δυναμις and dynamite. All of these linguistic tools can serve to make the concepts clear and fresh for you and your flock.

**Catch their attention with the same-old-same-new.
Show how the same Law applied and applies. Remind them
of the Savior who is the same then, now, and forever.**

Recall also that, while they wrote in Greek, the men who spoke from God did so with an awareness of the Hebrew of the Old Testament, certainly from the standpoint of the faith in which they had been raised, but also from the perspective of how the Septuagint had handled the same concepts in translation from Hebrew to Greek. It is often useful to glance, even briefly, at how the LXX worked a given word, phrase, or idea. Check the Hebrew and the LXX Greek of an Old Testament prophecy, when an epistle is using similar phrases to speak of its fulfillment. The software and technology available now to the Bible scholar enables him to do with a few clicks what formerly required a stack of books.

The writer does not flatter himself to think that much, if any, of this is new to the reader. What is here hoped is that you, the preacher, will be encouraged to continue using the tools which to acquire you sweated for years. Perhaps in no other place do those tools—yes, Greek, but also history, literature, sociology, communication, and anything that enhanced your ability to think critically—come together to serve God's people than in the preaching of the epistles. The Spirit bless your preaching of the epistles—and quickly.

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at Martin Luther College.*

ADVENT SERIES IDEA

Here's an idea for integrating mid-week Advent services with the Sundays of the Advent season. This approach treats the Advent season as a whole, instead of separating it into a "Sunday focus" and a "Wednesday focus." Since there are seven total services for Advent (4 Sundays + 3 Wednesdays), the seven letters to the seven churches of Revelation make a fitting series of texts. Certainly these seven letters strongly emphasize the message of Advent: repent and prepare.

For 2004, a series might look something like this (although various other themes/foci could easily be substituted):

"Behold, Jesus is Coming"

*Seven Advent Letters to Seven Churches
of Revelation*

Sunday, Nov. 28

"To Restore Eden" (Ephesus)

Wed. Dec. 1

"To Conquer Death" (Smyrna)

Sun, Dec. 5

"To Defend the Truth" (Pergamum)

Wed. Dec. 8

"To Search Our Hearts" (Thyatira)

Sun. Dec. 12

"To Wake the Dead" (Sardis)

Wed. Dec. 15

"To Open the Door" (Philadelphia)

Sun. Dec. 19

"To Give True Wealth" (Laodicea)



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But when I was, it was a very special time to be with the person and the family, and see the person go to be with the Savior. As you know, there are several appropriate passages to use. Psalm 23 was often my choice and appreciated by the family. Again comment after each phrase or verse. Then we have the comfort and assurance of verse 4, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."

After a death gather the family privately for a brief devotion. Scripture passages to use may be John 14:1-6, Revelation 7:9-17, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, or 2 Timothy 4:6-8.

Medical experts tell us that hearing is one of the last senses to go. Speak close to the person's ear in a loud voice as you share a Bible truth to bring the comfort of the gospel to the person.

Never leave a sickbed without having a devotion, even if the person is in a coma. Medical experts tell us that hearing is one of the last senses to go. Speak close to the person's ear in a loud voice as you share a Bible truth to bring the comfort of the gospel to the person. Never neglect the person in the nursing home or elsewhere who appears to be comatose from a stroke or accident or other cause. Bring the Word—sin and grace—to that person, and pray for and with that person. We cannot give such persons Holy Communion. But God does work through the Word and hears our prayers!

Be professional in dealing with the hospital and nursing home staff and realize that they have to deal with right to privacy laws. Don't make a nuisance of yourself

The Lord bless your ministry to the sick and shut-ins. May it bring comfort and peace to those you minister to. May it be a gratifying ministry for you. You are privileged to be a servant and shepherd of our Lord to carry out his special ministry to God's people!

Retired Pastor LeRoy H. Lothert currently resides in Morton, MN.

FLORILEGIUM

A collection of quotes plucked from various sources

"Moralism defangs the law; it gums you to death but never kills you."

– Kenneth Korby (May 1992)

"With the demand of the Law God makes us answerable, but with the promise of the Gospel He makes Himself answerable." (see WA 42 660 6)

– Ian Siggins: "Luther's Doctrine of Christ"

"As the first woman, by whom came sin, was made of a man without a woman; so the Man by whom sin was done away, was made of a woman without a man."

– St. Augustine (Sermon on John 2:1-11, NPN VI:473)

"Therefore God accepts only the forsaken, cures only the sick, gives sight only to the blind, restores life only to the dead, sanctifies only the sinners, gives wisdom only to the unwise."

– Luther (AE 14.163)

"The life of a saint is more a taking from God than a giving; more a desiring than a having; more a becoming pious than a being pious."

– Luther (AE 14.196)

"Thus the friends of a Christian are really not as useful to him as his enemies."

– Luther (AE 14.317)

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QUESTIONS? COMMENTS?

**If you have any questions or comments about
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