

PREACH

the Word

Vol. 8 No. 2

November/December 2004

according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 1:1)

HERE'S TO THE ONGOING REFORMATION

Did you first come to know him through his hymns? Then came your Small Catechism. Later we read from the Book of Concord. Still, many preachers who bear his name feel ill-at-ease when someone asks “Have you read much Luther?”

Exactly what's worth reading? Visits to the Sem library acquainted us with the reddish covers of *Luther's Works*, that shelf-hogging 55-volume set. There sits the monk Luther with quill in hand. Over here is the Luther seasoned by persecution, by love, by bad health, by the struggles of his church body, by the death of an infant and a teenager.

Let's say you're a pastor who doesn't have access to the big bound set. And perhaps, although LW is now available on CD-ROM for \$200, you don't like reading books from a computer screen. What choices remain for the lifelong learner?

A Daily Dose of Luther

CPH publishes a little hardcover of daily devotions named *By Faith Alone*. In format it's akin to *Meditations*; in content it's a fresh translation of both Bible passages and Luther's exposition of them. Useful ... handy size ... inexpensive (plus it makes a great gift).

Buried in your church library may be *Day by Day We Magnify Thee*. Originally from 1940's England, Fortress Press photo-reproduced it in paperback in the early 80's. DBD is slugs of Luther in King James language. There is one reading for each day keyed to the Church Year. Pastors need to present devotions in any number of different settings during the week, so DBD is the absolute motherlode of ideas.

To a reader who is always preparing for next Sunday, a daily dose of Luther is a reliable and welcome touchstone. He paved the way for us in distinguishing the Law from the Gospel. He keeps justification and sanctification in their proper sequence. Let Brother Martin remind you to speak both the *This we believe, teach and confess* as well as the *Therefore we condemn*. He has a child's interest in the natural world around him, alert to it and engaged in it. You already know the man as clever, conversational, and colorful.



A Student in Dr. Luther's Classroom: You

Here's a different idea to fertilize your sermon-preparation. Set a goal of reading one volume of Luther's Works during the next twelve months. (“Not likely,” Reverend Wiggins muttered dryly to himself.) It can be done by reading just a little more than one page per day. One page. You can do this! Log off the Internet one site sooner. Keep the book at hand where you'll see it.

A few titles follow that will bountifully repay the modest investment of your time:

- 1 *Genesis 1-5* (vol 1): origins of world, humans, family, sin, and Church.
- 2 *Lectures on the Psalms, #1* (vol 12): very good for a daily devotion.
- 3 *Sermons on the Gospel of John*, ch 14-16 (vol 24): the tension between what a disciple feels and what Jesus promises.
- 4 *Galatians 1-4* (1535), (vol 26): a primer on Law and Gospel.

Each of the above-mentioned volumes is laid out—and may be read—like a novel. Ask for one book this Christmas.

Diagnosing the Malady in a Text (part 1)

Last issue we talked about approaching your Sunday text.

To know the *Context* means to see the Big Picture in chapter, book, and testament. How does this episode fit into the scheme of the

Continued on page 2

whole Scripture? A Lutheran pastor, reading his Bible devotionally each morning, gets a feel for context.

After Context, what comes next for me is *Malady*. What's the specific problem against which the Holy Spirit is pitting the promise of life in Christ Jesus? Someone once said that in any piece of literature, what makes a great story is to get your hero up a tree ... then to start sawing off the limb on which he's perched.

Malady may be personified: Satan's in the Garden ... Assyrians are at the gates ... another Herod is on the throne ... Judaizers have surfaced.

God blesses preaching wired to Hebrew and Greek homework.

In the Psalms, the malady may seem abstract: "the wicked ... sinners ... mockers." By contrast, in the Epistles the malady is often neatly identified. Not so, however, in the Gospels, where one must often distill malady from the flow of the narrative.

The preacher needs to ask: "Where is the damnable feature of humanity? What is present here that requires God to send his holy Son to substitute for me ... in life and in death?"

Reverent, Thorough, and Scholarly

Those adjectives have been joined on the opening page of the Seminary catalog for a long time. It's being heard more and more, however, that what makes a really useful pastor has little to do with a man's Hebrew and Greek abilities. (Haven't we all wondered whether the final product issuing from Mequon and taking his place in parish and neighborhood needs all the rules of grammar, vocs, and translating?)

What remains true is that the Holy Spirit chose Hebrew and Greek as his heaven-to-earth media. Nothing will ever change that history.

Have you found that the Holy Spirit rewards your work with the Bible languages? I have had weeks in the ministry during which I did lots of language work, and I have had weeks in which I didn't do any. Either way, I still had to preach on Sunday. God permitted me to preach even when I did not present my best to him, when I was not faithful to the training I've received, to the people listening to me, or to the gifts he gave me.

What can we say for sure—without making commandments and binding consciences? We've heard what Luther said about the matter: "Lose the languages, lose the Gospel." If that's true, what a rebuke it is to my ministry.

Never have I spent so little as 15 minutes on the original text but that I became aware of insights specifically associated with that study. God blesses preaching wired to Hebrew and Greek homework. No, not in a mechanical way, and not in a way that encourages any further irreverent, less-than-thorough or unscholarly deskwork. But both God and the devil know the critical importance of the old texts.

Monthly Pastors' Study

One way to keep your language skills warm is to meet with

another pastor(s). Our circuit here in the Missouri River valley gets together once a month. This requires an hour's drive per man. We give attention to: Book of Concord, Hebrew, Walther's Law & Gospel, Lunch, Preaching, and Greek. We meet from 10:00 to 3:00 on a Monday. Each topic gets 40 minutes on a good day. At the end of the afternoon we go around the table for prayers.

During the Hebrew section we have been photocopying a Psalm. Someone reads a verse out loud and we bash through the translation together. This fall we purchased the newish spiral-bound MLC text. We're going to give its companion book of exercises a try.

Three from Walther

"It is a wrong application of the Gospel to preach it to such as are not afraid of sinning. On the other hand, an even more horrible situation is created if the pastor is a legalistic teacher, who refuses to preach the Gospel to his congregation because he says: 'These people will misuse it anyway.'" (p. 34)

"Objective peace, established through the shedding of Christ's blood, exists prior to our justification." (p. 196)

"A minister must not be satisfied with merely proclaiming the truth; he must proclaim the truth so as to meet the needs of his people." (p. 208)

Diagnosing the Malady in a Text (part 2)

"No Law in this text," said the pastor, scanning the verses for the coming Sunday.

Remember then that when God makes a Gospel promise, he takes for granted that his hearers do not have what he is offering. What sense would it make for God to offer you something you already possessed? In that case the hearer might as well yawn and say "old news."

If God offers the privilege of prayer, then we must take for granted that by nature we are not in communication with the true God. He must give that gift to his children in Christ.

If he is offering the water of life, God notices that by nature a man dies of spiritual thirst.

If God promises to defend me by his angels, then reality must be that by nature I am exposed and vulnerable to abuse by demonic powers.

What the preacher is doing with this deskwork is "reversing" the promised blessing. He is discovering what malady or deficiency God sees when he looks at his human creatures, and what specific blessing they absolutely, in Christ, must have.

Practice: Reverse several of God's promises and diagnose *Malady*:

- "If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven" (Jn 20).
- "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth" (Is 65).
- "My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Pp 4).
- "The LORD your God will raise up a prophet like me from among your own people" (Dt 18).

Continued on page 4

CHORE OR PASSION? “When Gospel Preachers Work at Preaching,” part 1 of 2

Pastor Phil Spaude, Casper, Wyoming

“Remember the fellow who was pinned by an eight-hundred-pound boulder—then cut his arm off in order to save himself? He’s taught himself to play the piano one-handed. How’s that for positive thinking? Preaching that honors confessional Lutheran theology, however, calls for more than positive thinking. Here God-pleasing change comes about by repentance produced through the Word. Our foes are so strong that our only lethal weapon is the power of Word and Sacrament.

One of those strong foes is the preacher’s sinful nature. Have you noticed how your flesh tries to turn the wonderful privilege of preaching into a burdensome chore? How can I use the power of the Word to fight my Old Adam—and not forget that, far from being a chore, preaching can be a great passion in my life? I don’t need to be a positive thinker as much as I need to be one who keeps putting my flesh to death, then rejoicing in God’s gifts to me.

Let’s be up-front: writing a sermon and then preaching it requires far more mental activity than most other tasks. I must be logical, doctrinal, concise. I must edify and inspire my hearers and not miss the Sunday morning deadline. What preacher hasn’t felt that pressure?

Jack Turner has climbed Grand Teton about four hundred times in his life. He questions why anyone thinks he would grow tired of it.

Preaching is hard and holy *work*. For some people, work is just a dirty four-letter word. For others, work is a passion—like sixty-two year old Jack Turner of Exum Mountain Guides in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. He has climbed Grand Teton about four hundred times in his life. Jack questions why anyone thinks he would grow tired of it. How could the art of sermon-writing and the activity of preaching be less a chore and more a passion for us?

Me First

This may sound selfish, but preaching benefits the preacher the most. I can’t indict my hearers unless I indict myself first. I can’t comfort my hearers with God’s forgiveness and power to change, unless I also announce these truths to myself first. My hearers never receive all the background information through which I sifted. All that research cannot be contained on just three single-spaced pages appearing as a Microsoft Word document. The person in the pew hears the sermon once, but the preacher in the pulpit heard (or thought through) the sermon maybe six or seven times. The basic reasoning that you may use when recruiting Sunday School teachers (“You will benefit the most!”) has never been more true than it is with Lutheran preachers.

It’s A Numbers Game

For most preachers with over two or three years of sermon



files, preaching is a familiar routine. That “good stress” keeps telling you to crank out another one the way you crank out hospital calls and shut-in calls, counseling sessions, meetings, every home visits, bulletins and newsletters, evangelism and inactive calls, and all the extra District or Synod work. Will the sermon this Sunday be any different from those other tasks?

Why should a twenty-minute sermon deserve VIP treatment—beginning Monday morning? The answer lies, of course, in the numbers. My wife, for example, schedules a never-ending stream of patients to see a dermatologist. Many of those hurting people will never get to see their man that same day. As you look out at the faces on any Sunday morning, however, you see the same numbers that he sees, a stream of hurting people whom the Holy Spirit will reach through your work – but all at the same time! You see your greatest numbers in this activity called *preaching*.

There’s the couple that drove two hours to be here, rather than attend the “other” Lutheran church only two miles from their home. The preacher sees doctors and managers and FBI agents, professionals and hourly workers. They rightly expect in his presentation not just a professional level of excellence but especially also strength for their journey.

You see kids sitting up front who don’t snooze; they need the message in their language, too. I see that woman who told me last week that she just moved back to town and “gives every church three Sundays.” A preacher sees Aunt Helen in her upper eighties who may be here for the last time before she falls again. You see couples with troubled marriages whom the Spirit has led here this morning. The Lutheran preacher sees grieving young people, hearts crying: “Is the LORD really on my side?” You see the prospect who told you he gets his religion on the run via radio or TV, but occasionally visits this church where you preach.

Numbers! We all know that the power is in the Word and not in the preacher. Yet so many people will benefit from the Word this Sunday morning because the preacher, God’s clay vessel, was striving for excellence in the days before Sunday ever arrived.

(Part 2 follows in the next issue.)

Diagnosing the Malady in a Text (part 3)

A useful (and legitimate) distinction during text analysis can be made between s-i-n and s-i-n-s. *Sin* is a condition, like leukemia. *Sin* is a status, “guilty as charged.” *Sin* is original, inborn, (Book of Concord: Hauptsünde). It is the aquifer beneath the rangeland of my intellect, emotion, and will. Flesh! Mocker! Fool! The Son of Adam is rebellious toward God. He is self-worshiping like Satan; he holds the Word in contempt. As the rite for *Holy Baptism* quotes, “without true fear of God and true faith in God.”

Sins, on the other hand, are fruits of that bitter root. Gossip and misuse of my sexuality belong here. Lies. Love of comfort, a cold heart toward the homeless, runaway credit cards. A short temper—all these are s-i-n-s. Would you say that it comes more naturally to preach against *sins*, rather than to diagnose and expose sin? Could we say that God’s issue with me is not primarily my *sins* but my *sin*?

An infant has not cursed its mother or clenched a fist in anger against its father. A baby may have no s-i-n-s, but babies die. God has spoken his withering “No!” over the human race (Gn 3:19).

In a Saudi Arabian marketplace, a thief may get his hand cut off for stealing. That solution will modify his behavior, his s-i-n-s. The diseased thing which lopping limbs does not fix is s-i-n, sunk deep and braided tightly into the thief’s heart. The desire to take what God has not given me may be as fervent as ever in the one-handed man.

Jesus became sin (2 Co 5). Jesus became a curse (Ga 3). “Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (Ps 2).

Here’s to your ongoing Reformation!

Pastor Tom Jeske, Omaha, Nebraska

YOU CAN PRINT THAT

- 1 “It is simply not true that when the compulsion of the Law is removed it is replaced by license to sin. It actually under all normal circumstances results in *more* diligence in the performance of good works, just as many a man works harder on his vacation when he is doing what pleases him than when he is busy on a job he hates.”
Siegbert Becker (“Christian Liberty,” conference paper, 1983)
- 2 “Young writers often suppose that style is a garnish for the meat of prose, a sauce by which a dull dish is made palatable. Style has not such separate entity; it is non-detachable, unfilterable. The beginner should approach style warily, realizing that it is an expression of self, and should turn resolutely away from all devices that are popularly believed to indicate style—all mannerisms, tricks, adornments. The approach to style is by way of plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity.”
E.B. White (*The Elements of Style*)
- 3 “My sons, do not be negligent now, for the LORD has chosen you to stand before him.”
(2 Chronicles 29:11)
- 4 “*Man* fell into sin. The one to be punished and to pay the penalty had to be a man, but one without sin.”
Philip Melanchthon (*Loci*)
- 5 (on 2 Corinthians 4:7) “[God] chose vessels of the most fragile material ... if this treasure were applied through implements which are firm in themselves, some of the credit for success might be attributed to the vessels. But if the vessels are weak, *needing protection rather than adding strength*, then it will become apparent that the treasure itself is the all-powerful agent.”
John Meyer (*Ministers of Christ*)
- 6 “When Jesus said ‘Follow Me,’ he was confiscating man for himself. It brought the *gift* and the *claim* of the Kingdom to bear on man.”
Martin Franzmann (*Follow Me*)

QUESTIONS? COMMENTS? If you have any questions or comments about *Preach the Word*, feel free to contact this year’s editor directly at tomjeske@phonet.com

PREACH
the Word

Preach the Word is published bimonthly by the WELS Commission on Worship
2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222-4398 414/256-3265
<BGerlach@sab.wels.net> <www.wels.net/worship>

Pastor Thomas Jeske, editor <tomjeske@phonet.com>
Wayne A. Laitinen, managing editor <laitinen@newulmtel.net>