

PREACH

the Word

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

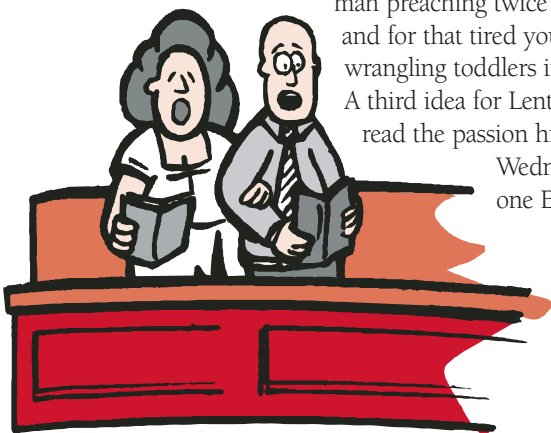
PREACHING AT MIDWEEK

A raw wind is blowing this March evening. Inside, a young pastor hopefully scans his 7 p.m. crowd. The room seems somehow bigger than usual, the worshipers farther away from him. Almost all these faces participated in worship three days ago. "I wonder what brought these people out tonight?" he muses. "Could it be that each one here learned to love midweek Lenten services as a child?" But wait. Here are a few surprises: an adult convert has come straight from work. A young couple in the very last row has brought their toddler and baby. (Mom may need some convincing that all the bundling and unbundling involved in coming to church for a second time this week will be worth her effort).

We all want Lent to be extra-ordinary. At the same time, we realize that pastor and musician prepare on a short week. Our people's work schedules force choices to be made. Children's bedtimes on a school night are an issue. Unstable weather weighs in. How do we give the worshipers good value for their extra devotion? Or is it OK if Wednesday pretty well mirrors Sunday's focus, Scriptures, message and music?

Consider: Sundays—even in Lent—are still Sundays. The first day of the week is "the Lord's Day," a festival of the resurrection, a "Little Easter." One approach recommends putting Old Testament or Epistle into the foreground. Another approach suggests the preacher look for a sanctification focus on Sundays in Lent. Be sure to keep the focus Wednesdays exclusively *Christus pro nobis*. This makes a more discernable distinction, both for the

man preaching twice in four days and for that tired young mom wrangling toddlers in the back row. A third idea for Lenten variety: read the passion history on Wednesday from one Evangelist only.



Rather than a harmonized passion history, consider reading from the synoptic Gospel for the year. Ash Wednesday has its own appointed lessons, so the following readings cover the remaining five midweek services for Year B. From these you may develop a midweek sermon series. See also *Christian Worship: Occasional Services*, pages 151ff.

	Mark
Passover	14:1-26
Gethsemane	14:27-42
Caiaphas	14:43-65
Pilate	14:66-15:15
Death and Burial	15:16-47

SAY WHAT YOU MEAN

Asked about the bandage on his hand, a restaurant cook remarked, "Pastor, you cut one carrot, you pay attention. You cut a hundred carrots, you get careless." Have you noticed that even the most beautiful Bible truths may suffer by speedy, repeated use?



How many times have you used the word "salvation" in a sermon or printed article this past month? Σωτηρια is a precious Bible idea. It can become, however, a convenient catch-all term that does not seem to require precision by speaker or hearer. When you used it, were you thinking of ...

- the *whole scope* of the Trinity's saving plan (Rv 7:10)?
- rescue from a *present* crisis (Pp 1:19)?
- *final* deliverance into heaven (1 Pe 1:5; Ro 13:11)?
- Jesus' redemptive work (He 2:10)?

ONE WAY TO ASSESS YOUR PREACHING Pastor Phil Spaude, Casper, Wyoming

In some ways the preaching expressions, method, and style a man develops over time are like a slow-moving BNSF train: he has great difficulty speeding up, slowing down or switching tracks. I have never heard a sermon in our circles that contained blatant false doctrine. I have heard—and preached—more than one sermon that was uninspiring. So how do you assess your preaching in an effort to make changes, improve content, and develop delivery skills to improve communication while at the same time being realistic about what can be changed?

Do you rely on your wife to call the homiletical balls and strikes? Or is the umpire a trusted parishioner who occasionally makes an unsolicited call such as “I liked that sermon”? Did you ever use the *Preach the Word* consultants to help you stretch your preaching skills further? Were you aware of the excellent evaluation form developed (WLQ, vol. 91:4) to allow leaders to constructively assess the sermon delivery of their pastor? Maybe you’ve used circuit meetings to critique your sermons using video or audio copy. The truth is, although sermon delivery is something very public, sermon assessment seems to be something very personal, like dental work in a patient’s mouth—too touchy to open up to anyone but a professional. The preacher often imagines himself in the best position to assess his own work. What about that idea?

One method of personal assessment I’ve learned uses a concept called wellness. This model comes from health-care professionals. They consider five standards to gauge the well-being of their patient: *physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual*. After you have finished your Scripture study and exegesis this week, you might consider trying this wellness template. It’s one way to better understand the makeup of your listeners. How does your audience connect, humanly speaking, to your Law/Gospel message?

Physical wellness in preaching may be related to your body language. The preacher must consider what non-verbal message he is giving his audience. Body language either reinforces your spoken message or confuses your hearers. Psychologists suggest that if body language is at odds with your spoken language, a listener almost always believes the body. For example, people may read finger-pointing as a sign of being preachy, of having a personal agenda. Folded arms suggest a barrier, a sign of being defensive. Other negative signals include shifting from one foot to another or eyes darting nervously. Preacher is giving clues to audience about what’s going on inside. On the other hand, stepping away from a pulpit (getting a little closer) may suggest openness and honesty. An especially powerful tool is the preacher’s smile—at the right place. A smile cannot be ignored; it’s a sign of friendliness, confidence, a positive attitude, a good mood. The preacher is saying “This is not just a job; I *want* to

be here.” Good eye contact (not staring at a person) helps the preacher in two ways. It conveys self-confidence, and it helps the preacher understand how well his words are being received. Some researchers claim that 50% of a spoken message is communicated through one’s body (as opposed to a person’s words)!

Social wellness in preaching refers to engaging people. When you preach you are asking your hearers to maintain perhaps the longest period of silence in all their waking hours that week. Notice how groups of people sitting or standing around at the mall, playground, or lunchroom are engaged in conversation. Most people need to talk; some need to chatter constantly (as cell-phone makers discovered.) God designed people to be social creatures; preachers will engage people longer when they understand that preaching is a form of dialogue. Recall how Malachi demonstrated one type of dialogue, Habakkuk another.

The rhetorical question, the logical argument, the use of the first person plural, the illustrated story from personal experience, and timely over-enunciation all can play a role in engaging people with Law and Gospel. The challenge for the preacher is to determine which form engages the audience best at that point of the sermon. Notice how Nathan used questioning in 2 Sm 7 and 12 to engage David. Preaching that recognizes the audience’s social makeup uses less lecture and more conversational proclamation. Understanding social wellness can stimulate the hearer’s thinking process, create active learners and maybe even keep your hearers from taking a commercial break while you speak.

Emotional wellness means that people are moved to act by their feelings of joy or sadness, anger or elation. Learning to touch the emotions can produce a spellbound audience. But reaching the emotions is a great challenge—especially when not reporting firsthand experiences. Example: even though I was not there, I must not retell the story of the slaughter of the innocents (Mt 2) as a detached, unaffected person. My hearers must feel some of the horror of Satan and his attacks on Christ, on his Church, and finally on individual Christians, so that when the day of evil comes, they can respond and take their stand.

Intellectual wellness means that people need to be stimulated by thinking and acting in new ways. Your brain needs exercise or it will atrophy. Columnist William Safire put it this way, “When you’re through changing, you’re through.” Preachers show we recognize this need of God’s people when we refrain from pulpit jargon and clichés.

(continued on page 3)

COMFORT UNDER THE CROSS

“The whole of Christendom consists of a little group of people who must bend their back and suffer, and carry more grief and anguish—laid on them by the world and the devil—than all other men. What man, in the face of such outward appearance, could feel or see or conclude that he is right with God?”

Certainly not reason, but the Holy Ghost must convince people; he is called the Spirit of Truth because he strengthens and upholds the heart against such appearance and feelings. Without him no man would have believed, or would believe now, that this Jesus Christ is true God, sitting eternally at the right hand of the Father—he who was thus shamefully nailed to the cross by his own people, like a thief.

And again, how could we of ourselves tell with certainty that we who believe in this Christ crucified—condemned and cursed and done to death by all the world as the devil’s friends and God’s foes—are in very truth God’s children and saints, which even we ourselves do not feel? Our heart tells us something very different because we are still so weak and sinful. But it is the work and power of the Holy Ghost which confirms this in our hearts, so that we can believe that it is true, as the Word tells us, and can live and die in that belief.”

Martin Luther (commentary on John, ch 16)

THREE FROM WALTHER

- 1 “Christ recognizes only two classes of human beings. In Matthew 13:38 he speaks of “Children of the Kingdom” and “Children of the Wicked One,” of wheat and tares. This thorough division ... must appear in every sermon of a sincere preacher. This is what your hearers must learn, that they are either spiritually dead or spiritually alive, either converted or unconverted, either under the wrath of God or in a state of grace, either Christians or unchristians, either asleep in sin or quickened unto a new life in God, subjects in either the devil’s or God’s kingdom.” (319)
- 2 “We observe that no book is apparently so full of contradictions as the Bible, and that, not only in minor points, but in the principal matter, in the doctrine how we may come to God and be saved. In one place the Bible *offers* free forgiveness to all sinners; in another place, forgiveness of sin is *withheld* from all sinners. In one passage a *free offer* of life everlasting is made to all men; in another, men are directed to *do something themselves* toward being saved. This riddle is solved when we reflect that there are in the Scriptures two entirely different doctrines, the doctrine of the Law and the doctrine of the Gospel.” (6)
- 3 “At absolution we say nothing but what has happened. That is the precious truth that forgiveness of sins has been acquired. If we would only truly believe in absolution, with what joy would we attend church whenever it is pronounced?” (173)

The Wellness Concept (part 2)

The preacher will also want to avoid creating “mind drift” in his hearers. Some researchers claim mind drift can be avoided by speaking faster (but not racing). Most hearers can easily process about 500 words per minute, yet few preachers can speak faster than 150 words per minute without rushing. One theory called “Route 350” claims that listeners will assign some of the unused 350 words to other sources of stimulation (like a crying baby or a bulletin). One reason why sermons need to be well-memorized: Keep your listeners off Route 350!



“Luther with Gray Hair,” by Prof. Karl Bauer, 1868-1942

Spiritual wellness recognizes that the Triune God designed a remarkable human body—normally 23 paired chromosomes that every hearer can call home. God gave us an even greater gift called a soul so that we can have an eternal relationship with him. Both the Old Man and the New Man who live inside that home must be addressed. The Holy Spirit’s operating system is “soul talk” designed to crush and slay, drown and kill that Old Man with the Law. As that conversation develops, we supply spiritual wellness to hearers through talk centered on the Second Adam—talk that comforts, absolves, forgives, empowers, and restates promise after promise the LORD makes to these people.

The strength of the *Wellness Concept* for assessing a live sermon is that it can force a preacher to think about how the Creator wired his hearers. Lutheran preachers want to exploit every avenue that reaches the heart of the hearer with the Gospel. Let’s agree: thorough knowledge of Scripture, attention to logic, and artful use of Law and Gospel are the heart of sermon wellness—not gimmicks or endless stories. Yet we want to use all of God’s rich gifts in the science and art of communication. Then what Jesus told that teacher of the law will also apply to me, “You have answered wisely.”

THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE

“Neither pleasant nor practical.” Does that sum up how most of us preachers—in this chapter of our lives—would view a book about English grammar? But read ‘em and weep:

- “Happy Easter from the Johnsons”
- “your kind gift to Terry and I”
- “the team got to it’s own 9 yard line”

Our Colorado Mission Counselor once remarked that if a pastor is his own secretary, he is overpaid and underqualified. Ouch. Pastors who have secretaries, however, are likely still in the minority among us. So those are *your* sentences are being read in service folders and newsletters. For those among us who can’t not write, here is a very fine little friend and helper:

Paperback novel sized and a mere 85 pages (not counting a glossary in case Der Pre diger can’t remember what a *transition* is), *The Elements of Style* will cost you all of seven dollars. And does it ever come recommended:

“No book in shorter space, with fewer words, will help any writer more than this persistent little volume.”
(*The Boston Globe*)

“Should be the daily companion of anyone who writes for a living, and for that matter, anyone who writes at all.”
(*Greensboro N.C. Daily News*)

“It’s hard to imagine an engineer or a manager who doesn’t need to express himself in English prose as part of his job. It’s also hard to imagine a writer who will not be improved by a liberal application of *The Elements of Style*.”
(*Telephone Engineer & Management*)

Here are a couple of suggestions to help you actually use the book. Keep it on your desk and scan three or four pages a day. Read it with a yellow highlighter in hand. You’ll easily be through it in one month’s time, besides using *who* or *whom* with newly-recovered confidence!



YOU CAN PRINT THAT

- 1 “If God’s grace is absolute, man’s last defenses as ethical man are down; he is at God’s mercy. And man would rather, as the example of the Pharisee tragically shows, not be at God’s mercy, at least not absolutely. He wants to hold on to some fragment of self.”

Martin Franzmann (*Follow Me*)

2. “Say things before you write them. ... People are often amused if they walk into my office when I’m tackling a tough piece of writing. There I am, sitting at my [desk], talking and gesturing to no one in particular. What they don’t realize is that I’m talking to Joe, an invisible friend of mine who sits directly in front of me. ... Everything I write, I try out on Joe first. I have to explain things carefully and be sure he understands.”

John L. Beckley
(*The Power of Little Words: Some Ideas to Improve Your Writing*)

- 3 “Give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name.”

David (Psalm 86)

- 4 To his son serving in his first parish: “I beg you, do not look upon [your current Call] as a steppingstone, but rather say: ‘Here I shall stay as long as it pleases God, if it be his will, until I die.’ Look upon every child, your confirmands, every member of the congregation, as if you will have to give account for every soul on the Day of the Lord Jesus. Every day commit all these human souls from the worst and weakest of hands (namely your own) into the best and strongest of hands. Then you will be able to carry on your ministry not only without [worry], but also with joy overflowing and joyful hope.”

Friedrich von Bodelschwingh (quoted by Doberstein
in *The Minister’s Prayer Book*; Fortress Press)

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