

PREACH

the Word

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A PAINFUL PRIVILEGE: PROCLAIMING LAW AND GOSPEL EFFECTIVELY AT A FUNERAL

Editor's Note: One of the privileges serving in the parish ministry accords is preparing and preaching funeral sermons. Some funeral sermons are very difficult to preach; others are not so difficult. But all present the preacher with opportunities – perhaps some of the best opportunities – to present God's law and gospel to people who need to hear that message...and are most often very ready and eager to hear it.

This past May I had the privilege of hearing a funeral sermon whose circumstances could certainly be described as difficult. Some of you are aware of these circumstances. Nathan Ebert, the 16-year-old son of Pastor Kurt Ebert, who serves at Abiding Word, Highlands Ranch, Colorado, died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. But – God be forever praised – he was able to make his way downstairs to his stunned parents, where he confessed his sin as well as his faith. Before he died, his father was able to point him to his Savior and to his salvation.

Pastor Earle Treptow of Zion, Denver, had the painful privilege of conducting Nathan's funeral. I don't believe anyone who heard that sermon will ever forget it. Below is an excerpt from it, consisting of basically the first half. Following that are comments from Earle as he reflects on the task of writing this sermon, as well as a reaction from Kurt, the grieving father who listened to that sermon. My prayer is that you will find this edifying, both from the clear proclamation of law and gospel that Earle's sermon presents, as well as the insights into the writer's and the hearer's thoughts. While we may never preach a sermon under similar circumstances, I believe we can all find guidance and encouragement in preparing and preaching funeral sermons from the insights of Earle and Kurt.

Many thanks to these brothers for fighting through their emotions and putting their thoughts down on paper. You can read the entire manuscript of Earle's sermon at www.wels.net/jump/ptw. I encourage you to do so.

Brent Merten

Galatians 2:20
Nathan Philip Ebert Christian Victory
May 14, 2008

HE DID WHAT?

"What?" we asked, when told that Nathan had passed from this life on Thursday night. The news just didn't register. When told that Nathan had died from a self-inflicted wound, that he had shot himself in the chest, we asked in disbelief, "He did what?" We were shocked. We simply didn't expect it; it didn't make sense. He seemed to be having a good year at school. He had just celebrated his sixteenth birthday; he was looking forward to getting his driver's license. Though he had his gloomy, down times, it didn't seem all that strange for a teenager to have mood swings.

While we know that suicides occur, we just assume that they occur out there, in lives of people that we don't know all that well. This isn't supposed to happen in a Christian high school; this isn't supposed to happen in a Christian family; this simply isn't supposed to happen, period. When it actually does happen, and we find out that we are not immune, we're shocked. "He did what?"

We really shouldn't be shocked. We wouldn't be shocked if we listened carefully to what God says in his Word. This is what God says about all people, Nathan included, *"Every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood."* Nathan was, like King David, *"sinful at birth; sinful from the time my mother conceived me."* There was nothing good in Nathan by nature. He was sinful. He was thoroughly corrupt. What should we expect someone thoroughly corrupt on his own to do? Sin. That's what sinners do. They reveal the thoughts and attitudes of their heart by acts of rebellion against God's holy law.

Those who are born in sin view the world only through the lens of the question, "What do I want to do?" Nathan's sinful nature focused on self. It's not particularly shocking that someone who was by nature obsessed with doing what he wanted to do would try to take his own life.

Remember, too, where Nathan lived. I don't mean Centennial or Littleton or Colorado. He lived in this unbelieving world that insists that human beings are free to take their own life. Going out on your own terms, at your own time, to free yourself from pain and difficulty, is, according to the world, the right of everyone. Though the Lord tells us not to listen to the world, it's hard to ignore when they are jamming their opinions down our throats. It's not particularly shocking that a person with a sinful nature would listen to the world and attempt to take his own life.

What about our arch-enemy? St. Peter tells us that *"Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour."* Satan will not content himself with the ruin of God's creation. He so hates God that he wants to destroy every one of God's people. The devil is no weak, witless enemy. The Liar knows how to spin a yarn. He knows how to hook people with his lies. He deceived Nathan into believing the lie that suicide would be a courageous thing to do, that only a young man with great strength could take his own life. He deceived Nathan into believing the lie that the world would be a better place without him. Considering that the devil deceived perfect Adam and Eve, it's hardly shocking that he deceived Nathan.

When we listen to what God says in his Word about the sinfulness of our nature, the power of the world's temptations, and the deceit of the devil, it's not particularly shocking to hear what Nathan did. In some respects, then, we really have no reason to ask, "He did what?"

But today we most certainly do have reason to ask that question. It's the question that we want to ask for years to come, not in sorrow, but in wonder; not in sadness, but in joy. It's a question we want to ask, not about Nathan, but about God and what God did last Thursday: "He did what?"



REFLECTIONS ON A DIFFICULT ASSIGNMENT

“What am I going to say, Lord? What am I going to say to my brother in ministry, whom I love and respect, to help him in this painful situation? What am I going to say to my sister in ministry, whom I love and respect, to comfort her? What am I going to say to high school students who have lost a schoolmate and friend, to assist them in their sorrow?” I can’t quote verbatim my prayers in the days leading up to Nathan’s funeral, but those were the sentiments.

In preparation for preaching, I had followed my normal pattern. I had carefully studied the verse that brother Kurt had asked me to use. I had identified the key points of the text. In a break from normal preparation, I had even written down a list of people who would be attending. Without assuming to know the thoughts, questions, and feelings in the hearts of God’s people, I tried to guess at the different ways in which they might be hurting. My thought was that writing down that list would help me in writing the sermon. Perhaps it did in the long run. In the short term, though, it produced in me an even greater sense of fear. “What am I going to say to address all of those questions and all of those hurts?”

God’s Word is powerful and effective. It never returns to the Lord empty-handed. I know that from his promise and also from experience. I had full confidence in the power of the Word. What I didn’t have was full confidence in my ability to stand to the side and let the Word sound forth through me. I feared that the outline I followed might confuse rather than clarify, that I might end up at center stage instead of Christ. I feared that I might end up hurting those that I wanted more than anything to help. I even feared that I might give unwitting encouragement to the sin by which Nathan’s physical life came to an end. In fear, I prayed, “What am I going to say, Lord?”

Even after finishing the writing and editing process, so that I had words to say, uncertainty still remained. Were these the words that God’s people needed to hear?

The night before the service, another question surfaced. “How am I going to say it?” The emotion of the situation was nearly overwhelming. Every time that I thought about what had happened and considered the pain that the family had to be enduring, I felt myself choking up. When others were crying, I wanted to join them. Fifteen minutes before the service I was alone in a room, in tears, hurting for the family. “How, Lord, am I going to say it?”

The Lord had me right where he wanted me – feeling incapable of the work he had called me to do. We know that the work the Lord places before us is beyond us. We are not, on our own, equal to the tasks we face. But our weakness is not God’s weakness. When we feel incapable, we are most capable. It is in our weakness and frailty that his grace and strength shine through most beautifully. He makes us competent, in keeping with his promises. He graciously uses us as his instruments to serve his people in their time of need. That’s exactly what he did. He knew what people needed to hear, so he gave me the words to speak. He knew my emotional state, so he gave me the strength to serve as his mouthpiece. Just like he always does.

Thank God for the regular reminders he gives about the ministry to which he has graciously called us! We speak *his* word, with *his* strength, using *his* gifts, for *his* people, to *his* glory.

Earle Treptow, Denver, Colorado

A LISTENER RESPONDS

We preachers are so used to being on the sending end of a funeral message, it’s easy to become calloused to the power of God’s words on the hearts of the grief-stricken. Sitting in the pew, wallowing in sadness, I craved the voice of God. The law and gospel presented so specifically, so honestly, so compassionately that day reflected the words of Franzmann’s hymn, “Thy strong Word did cleave the darkness” – of despair, guilt, and death.

I knew Earle was right when he confronted the huge crowd that day, but especially the tear-stained group up front, with my son’s sin. “He did what?” my preacher-brother asked. The question was not new. It had been hammering in my brain and shocking our family, friends, and schoolmates for the last six days. We couldn’t believe it, either. He was a good kid. He was popular and talented. He seemed to be going places. “*How could he do this to us?*” we screamed inside. Anger welled up within us like a geyser. The pointed law that connected my 16-year-old’s unfathomable action with the devil’s attacks, the world’s lies, and his own perverse nature caused me to nod my head in agreement. It connected the dots. It forbade platitudes. “There is no one righteous – not even one” was the unavoidable reason for the ugly casket before us.

I was glad for the sense of balance that the preacher brought to the sermon, however. He lingered long enough, but not too long, on the cause of our sorrow. It’s as if he couldn’t wait to get to the other, “He did what?” Neither could I. Our gracious Lord did what? He came – for my son! He died – for my son! He rose again – for my son! He sent the Holy Spirit in baptism – for my son! He preserved my son in faith, snatching life out of the jaws of death! My son is in glory because the sinner has One who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He lives eternally by faith in the Son of God, who loved him and sacrificed his all for him. No more sin and death for him. No more guilt and recriminations for us. “Then the splendor, then the life...”

Thank you, Jesus!

By the time my brother Earle was done preaching, my eyes were off the casket and squarely on my Savior’s amazing power and love, even at a most painful time in my life. For that gift I am very, very grateful. I will never forget that sermon theme or the comfort and encouragement our Lord rendered that day through his servant.

Kurt Ebert, Littleton, Colorado

TRANSITIONS: THE FORGOTTEN MIDDLE CHILD

“Marcia, Marcia, Marcia!” whined Jan Brady. As the middle child, Jan felt overshadowed by her older sibling. Marcia was the one that everyone paid attention to, while Jan got lost in the shuffle, at least in her mind.

The transition between major parts in our sermons can easily become Jan Brady. We spend time early in the week studying the text in the original language. We carefully craft a theme and parts. A skeleton takes shape in the form of an expanded outline. We come up with an interesting and appropriate introduction that hooks our listeners and draws them into the text and into the sermon. We flesh out the body of the sermon. And we pen a conclusion that leaves everyone with the gospel ringing in their ears before we say the final “Amen.”

But what about the transition between the parts? What about the middle of the sermon? Speaking for myself, it’s easy to give short-shrift to this part of the sermon. How much time do we spend formulating a transition that not only bridges the main parts, but holds the attention of our listeners, even making them eager to hear what comes next?

To be fair, the transition probably shouldn’t be something we spend a tremendous amount of time and energy writing. Far more important is making sure that we have a good handle on the text, and that we are presenting God’s law and gospel clearly and memorably. Yet how easy it is for us to lose our listeners at that point in the sermon. By the midpoint of the sermon, they’ve already been listening for ten minutes or so. That may not seem long at all, but keep in mind the fact that the average attention span of today’s adults, conditioned by years of avid TV watching, struggles to remain focused for much more than seven minutes or so. How many pew-sitters are we on the verge of losing, or perhaps have we already lost by the time we hit the transition?

More than just a segue between Roman numerals one and two, the transition can serve to refocus wandering minds, rousing them from their daydreams and bringing them back into the fold of Good Shepherd’s sheep who listen to his voice.

Here are some possible ways to help your transitions do that:

- Forget trying to make your transition smooth and seamless. Make it an abrupt shift. Don’t make your listeners guess where you’re going in the sermon.
- Ask a question. Questions can help refocus and redirect the listener. Make the question point the listener to the next part of the sermon for the answer.
- Insert an appropriate illustration. A good illustration can serve as both a bridge to the next part of the sermon as well as a breather for the listener who is struggling to stay focused.
- Treat the second part of your sermon almost like a second sermon by starting it with a brief introduction. Introductions get the listener into the sermon; they can also get the listener *back* into the sermon.

A SUNDAY ADVENT SERMON SERIES

Some congregations have midweek Advent services. Some don’t. Larger, established congregations, especially in the Midwest, usually do. Newer congregations, especially in outlying areas of the synod, sometimes don’t.

If you don’t (or even if you do), you might want to consider setting your Advent Sundays apart, and thereby enhance your members’ preparations for the coming of Christ, by crafting your worship around a four-part sermon series.

Using the *Christian Worship* lectionary, here’s a possibility based on the Old Testament lessons:

- Come, Lord Jesus...to purify us (Isaiah 63:16b,17; 64:1-8)
- Come, Lord Jesus...to comfort us (Isaiah 40:1-11)
- Come, Lord Jesus...to set us free (Isaiah 61:1-3,10,11)
- Come, Lord Jesus...to fulfill God’s promises (2 Samuel 7:8-16)

A new church year might also be a good time to consider making use of the optional lessons of the supplemental lectionary that has been produced in conjunction with *Christian Worship Supplement*. Check out the preview of the forthcoming *Planning Christian Worship II* that’s available on the Commission on Worship’s Web site. This preview consists of the festival half of Year B. It includes fresh summaries of *Christian Worship*’s lectionary readings (not merely a reprint of the earlier version) and supplemental lectionary summaries. CW and hymnal supplement hymn suggestions are also included.



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2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222-4398 414/256-3265

Pastor Brent Merten, editor; mtvalley@vail.net, 970/328-6718
Bryan Gerlach, managing editor; Bryan.Gerlach@sab.wels.net
Back issues are at www.wels.net/ptw