

# PREACH

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## THE SERMON IN WORSHIP: PREACHING WITH PARTNERS

By James Tiefel

Preparing a sermon is a lonely job. The Spirit is in the Word, of course, but he rarely suggests a theme and parts and never corrects bad grammar. And preachers want to be alone; they look for places they can be alone: the church office, the parsonage basement, in the car on the way to the hospital. We get away from the phone, the email, and the kids. Then we can think and organize and write. It's great to be alone when we're writing a sermon.

But no preacher wants to be alone when he preaches. An empty church is the church planter's nightmare. A preacher without people only ponders; he doesn't preach. We can't herald if there are no hearers.

And so the preacher prepares alone so that he can preach in public, to people. Dan Leyrer reminded us in the last issue of *Preach the Word* that some of those people are guests, and some don't know the way to God through Jesus. He encouraged us to keep those people in mind when we preach and remember that preaching always has an outreach component.

My assignment in this series of articles is to focus on the worship aspect of preaching, but I'm not going to take the opposite tack

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House of God and its customs.***



Prof. Leyrer took and remind readers that preaching also has a nurture component. The point of this article is that preaching to people happens in a place where people are, whether those people are lost or found. In other words, the sermon has a setting. The sermon has surroundings, and the preacher who prepares his sermon alone needs to remember that, when he preaches, he's going to have partners.

### **Preaching Where You're Preaching**

The site of Athens' supreme court when the city was independent, the Areopagos, hadn't lost any of its prestige even after the Romans removed its power. It was a place where great men pondered great ideas, usually men more renowned and learned than tent-makers from Tarsus. Paul was an invited guest, surrounded by temples, statues, and men wearing fine linen. Paul was a preacher who understood the setting for his sermon. We hear none of the hard words he used with the Galatians and Corinthians. He doesn't oppose his protagonists face to face as he did to Peter. He spoke politely; he complimented his hearers. He spoke their kind of language: he began from the perspective of reason and universal law. His message was the same as it always was: he proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. But he recognized his surroundings, and he respected them in his preaching.

Jesus was in Nazareth. He'd been on a preaching tour of Galilean synagogues, and now he was home. The local boy had become a well-known teacher, and he was invited to read one of the appointed lessons and comment on it. Obviously, he anticipated the fury his sermon would cause. He might have grabbed the scroll, held it over his head and said, "I don't need to read this; I authored this!" He could have exposed the synagogue ceremonial for what it was: the tradition of men he later called white-washed tombs. But he didn't. He respected the House of God and its customs. He stood to read, as was the custom; he unrolled the scroll, as was the custom; he sat down to preach, as was the custom. His message was unflinching: "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." But Jesus knew where he was preaching, and he respected the place where he was.

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## Preachers Have Partners

Whether we're preaching as outreach or as nurture, we preach most often in a setting called public worship. The setting is going to influence our preaching just as it influenced the sermons of Paul and Jesus.

Unlike Paul and Jesus, the preacher who preaches in public worship isn't the only one with something to say. Lutheran worship focuses on Word and Sacrament, and the preacher who stands in the pulpit (or even the preacher who walks away from the pulpit) is never very far away from the font and the altar. Preachers can overstate the value of "preaching to the Sacrament," especially if this becomes contrived or if they contend that the sermon is unfulfilled without the Sacrament. But it seems so natural for the preacher to point to his sacramental partners to underscore his message:

Just when it seems like you can't say no to sin anymore, when the power seems gone, and the purpose seems useless – just remember the font. That's where your Lord Jesus pushed your sinful nature down under that water and killed it. And then he lifted you out of that water and he gave you a new life. And what Jesus did at your baptism, you can do with his power every day when you admit your sins and look to him to forgive you. Imagine that: baptized again – everyday!

You hear the words and you remember the promises. But that old demon called guilt whispers in your ear: "Remember when...remember when...remember when?" And you ache for the screaming to stop and you want so bad to not remember the guilt, and then your Lord Jesus comes to you at this meal and says: "Take this...eat this; drink this. This is the body I gave for you and the blood I shed for you. Remember me, not guilt. Guilt accuses you; I forgive you."

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In the Lutheran liturgical service, the preached Word partners with the Word proclaimed by other voices: the complementary scripture readings, the appointed Psalm, Verse, and Prayer of the Day, the hymns, the choir's anthem, even the instrumental music. Planning and coordination bring all these voices to the preacher's disposal. A sermon on Reformation finds in the First Lesson for End Time 1 a concrete example of what it means in the Gospel to "stand up before governors and kings" (Mark 13:9):

Martin Luther faced a fire when he stood up before the emperor and the church and took his stand on the Word of God. But the fire Luther faced wasn't any hotter than the fire

in that furnace we heard about this morning. Of course the fire scared Luther, and it scared those three men who stood in their fire, too. But nobody gets burned when God is close by, and God is always close by his people who defend his truth.

On Christmas Day the preacher proclaims the mystery of the Incarnation in John 1. He uses careful language to explain the Word who was with God and was God. And then he reaches for words his hearers know:

You know this Word who was God. He's the friend you talk about Sunday after Sunday. This Word is one who is **God from God, Light from light, true God from true God.** It's this absolutely divine Word who **came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became fully human.** And he did this **for us and our salvation.** That's right; he did this all to save us all.

The preacher who knows the musician is planning music during the offering based on the tune of "Beautiful Savior" can conclude his Mark 9 sermon on Transfiguration:

What a Savior Peter, James, and John saw: **wearing clothes that were dazzling white**, whiter than anyone could bleach them! What a beautiful Savior Peter, James, and John saw! But they would see a Savior more beautiful than that: a Savior whose hands and feet and head and back oozed drops of blood, a Savior hanging helplessly on a cross, a Savior who looked – no, a Savior who was – all alone in all the world. But in that ugly Jesus we see our Savior, a beautiful Savior, who gave his life that we could be beautiful to God.

And then the musical partner proclaims a sermon from the bench that solidifies in hearts the message the preacher wants to share.

When we preach in public worship, we're surrounded by people, lots of people. They have different experiences, different strengths and weaknesses, different crosses and triumphs. They listen while we preach; they smile, shake their heads, and a few shed tears. They can be our partners as we preach:

I know this is hard for some of you; I can see it in your faces.

There are people here this morning who've gone through this. They know what it's like to lose someone they love. You can ask them about it, and most of them will be willing to tell.

Sometimes we feel very alone, like we're the last person on earth who has the courage to say what's right, like there's no one else willing to take a stand. Look around, brothers and sisters. Look at these people here today. You may not see them in action; you may not know what they're saying at

work or with classmates or in their families. But they're here today precisely because they are taking a stand and they're looking for courage and they want to do better – which is exactly why you're here this morning.

### Partners Help Preachers

Preparing a sermon is a lonely job. That's why the preacher is wise to look not only for the power of Spirit but also for the input of his partners as he thinks and writes. The witness that comes from the Sacraments, the day's Proper, and the people gathered for worship support and solidify the sermon's main point. Respect for our partners adds breadth to our preaching and helps hearers – both the lost and the found – remember that they and the preacher are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

## A REVIEW EXERCISE

Take your last ten sermons and check for the emphases found in Prof. Tiefel's article. How frequently were there allusions to the Sacraments? How creatively did those sermons echo their proclamation partners, the other elements in worship those days?

Some preachers work with a reminder list, a list of sources regularly consulted beyond text study: the Confessions, commentaries, hymns, and much more. Background information behind hymn or poet is also valuable. See *CW:Handbook* and *CWS Accompaniment Edition* (or the online file "Accompaniment Edition Notes on Hymns"). Hymn quotations need not be the hackneyed "as the hymnwriter says..." Allusion is often more than adequate.

HymnSoft has a search function. Even if you never use HymnSoft for MIDI, it still serves as the only concordance for CW.

## PREACHING FROM THE SUPPLEMENTAL LECTIONARY

It was early morning, before dawn. A solitary figure got up out of bed as quietly as he could, so as not to disturb anyone else in the small house. He slipped out the door. Then he walked out of town. Off in a solitary place, he began to pray.

"Couldn't he have remained in the house and silently prayed, while staying curled up in his bed?" we say. We misunderstand, though.

Jesus had to get out of town, he told his disciples, when Simon and his companions found him. Not only had Peter and the others searched for Jesus. "Everyone is looking for you!" they exclaimed (Mark 1:37).

They couldn't sway him, though. Jesus wasn't just taking a break from the crowds in town. He said he *had* to leave.

"No," they said. "Stay here with us." (See Luke 4:42).

Jesus had to decline. He needed to visit synagogues in other towns, too. The only man who ever could do whatever he pleased – as all his miracles the day before proved – astonishingly, was *bound*: "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent" (Luke 4:43).

We whom the King has called to spread his resurrection-reign must preach his good news, too. There is no other option.

God himself prayed in your place, we tell others. Jesus preached in your place. He always did what his Father wanted, in your place. Jesus went alone to the cross and died in your place.

Never assume people already know these things, or that these truths aren't catchy enough. If we keep preaching the truth, we will save ourselves and our hearers (1 Timothy 4:16). "Woe to me," said Paul, conversely, "if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Corinthians 9:16).

Another time Paul told the Ephesian elders that if any under their care perished, Paul could not be responsible. "I declare to you today," he said, "that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Acts 20:26-27).

Paul preached God's whole counsel whether he only had three Sabbaths in a city, as in Thessalonica (Acts 18), or whether, as in Ephesus, he held discussions daily in a lecture hall for two years (Acts 19).

Boil it down, then. Wherever God has called you to be his herald to dying sinners, for however long you are there, you are under his direct orders, with twin priorities:

- Preach the good news about my Son to as many as you can. (See Mark 16:15).
- Preach my whole plan. (See Matthew 28:20).

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These priorities almost certainly send you week by week to one of the lectionaries in common use among us, especially the one year and three year lectionaries in our hymnal, *Christian Worship* (pages 163-166) and the new supplemental lectionary in *Christian Worship: Supplement* (pages 80-82, and online at <http://connect.wels.net>. Once you are logged in, go to Area of Ministry/Parish Services/Worship/Quick Links/Christian Worship Supplement Resources.)

The three year lectionaries in *Christian Worship* and *Christian Worship: Supplement* share a feature that differs them from the one year lectionary in CW, or from the Historic, Eisenach, Thomasius, Synodical Conference and Soll selections found in Ernst Wendland's *Sermon Texts* (NPH, 1982). The CW and CWS three-year lectionaries read through the Gospels of Matthew (Year A), Mark (Year B) and Luke (Year C) consecutively in the Epiphany and Pentecost seasons. During Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter and Endtime, they read from those three Gospels topically. Lessons from John also appear during those seasons in all three years, especially in the Easter season.

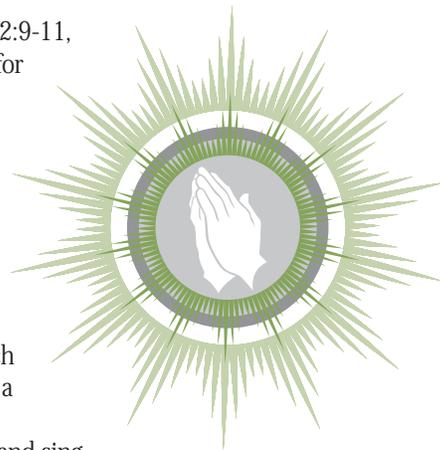
Wendland writes, "The strengths of the ILCW Series lie in its Old Testament selections, which show a greater correlation with the church year than most other pericopes, its varied use of the Gospels, and its consecutive readings of the Epistles" (*Sermon Texts*, page 45).

You may agree with Wendland's last point if you're preaching through the Epistle lessons in Pentecost.

Then, for example, next summer from Pentecost 2C to Pentecost 7C (June 6 through July 11, 2010), you can preach through some of the main texts in Galatians. In 2011 you and your flock can head to Rome for the summer, as you preach Romans texts from Pentecost 2A to Pentecost 17A, from June 26 through October 9, 2011. (See WTL No. 13, May 2005, for a sermon series on these Romans texts as well as two other series.)

You may disagree with Wendland's last point about consecutive readings of the Epistles, though, if you're preaching through the Old Testament or Gospel lessons in Pentecost. Pentecost 20B (October 18, 2009) provides one example. The Gospel for the day is Mark 10:2-16, Jesus' teaching on divorce and marriage, and his blessing of the little children. One year you might preach on Mark 10:2-12, and three years later on Mark 10:13-16. In another Year B you might preach on Genesis 2:18-24, the Old Testament lesson CW appoints, since it describes Eve's creation and Adam and Eve's marriage.

Yet what does Hebrew 2:9-11, the CW Epistle lesson for Pentecost 20B, have to do with marriage? Nothing overt. It teaches us the wondrous grace that Jesus calls us *brothers* (cf. Psalm 22:22 and Hebrews 2:12). So it's not far-fetched to preach on Hebrews 2:9-11 on a Sunday in which the congregation will hear and sing about Christian marriage; it's a stretch, though, if you're trying to stick to a single service theme.



A stronger example comes on Pentecost 22A – which, if our Lord tarries, because of late Easters in 2011, 2014, 2017 and 2020, won't occur again among us until October 29, 2023! The Old Testament (Isaiah 45:1-7) and the Gospel (Matthew 22:15-21) are about God's rule over civil authority. The Epistle, from 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5a, is not about government; it's about Paul's prayers and the Thessalonians' predestination.

Couldn't we read Romans 13:1-10 that Sunday, instead? Not if we're following the appointed lessons, for Romans 13 comes up six weeks earlier, on Pentecost 16A.

Enter the lectionary in *Christian Worship: Supplement*. It eliminates all *lectio continua* in the appointed Epistles, and aims to make a single theme for the Sunday clear. Therefore it appoints Romans 13:1-7 for Pentecost 22A. For Pentecost 20B it appoints Ephesians 5:21-6:4, Paul's glorious words to husbands and wives in Christ.

Isn't Ephesians 5:21-31, though, the appointed Epistle for Pentecost 14B? (Slap yourself on the back if you knew that without looking it up.)

Moral: be careful "cherry-picking" lessons, if you use the CWS lectionary. You may find duplication if you alternate between CW and CWS lectionaries based on what you'd like to preach next, or what seems to fit the theme of the Sunday for which you're planning.

Plan ahead, instead. The remaining articles in this series will offer specific help. God willing, the next issue will cover lessons that duplicate elsewhere in the CW and CWS pericopes.

Daniel Witte