

# Preach the Word

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A new volume welcomes a new writer. Pastor Tom Westra has served in Cincinnati, OH since 1985. Other service to the synod includes the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Governing Board.

## Who am I?

"Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Ex 3:10)

Who of us has not asked a similar question? Who am I—sinner that I am—that I should convict others of *their* sins? If the congregation to whom I preach knew the wickedness of my heart they would turn away in disgust. Who am I—in desperate need of healing myself—that I should bring the healing salve of the Gospel to the crushed and broken?

"Who am I, that I should go...?" Thanks, Moses, for asking the question. Quite honestly, I was wondering the same thing about you.

Moses, at 40? Maybe. He's got a chance. Young. Strong. Well-schooled. Well-connected. Confident—some might say brash. The Prince of Egypt. Who better to lead his people?

Moses at 80? No way. Old. Tired. A failure and a fugitive. Smells like sheep. I'd put his chances at slim to none. Maybe forty years ago he thought he could lead God's people out of Egypt. Now he knows he can't. And so he asks, "Who am I, that I should go?"

Paul asks a similar question, "Who is equal to such a task?" (2 Co 2:16) A few verses later, he answers: "Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us ministers of a new covenant..." (3:5-6)

"And God said, "I will be with you.'" (Ex 3:12) It was, after all, the LORD who would deliver Israel, not Moses.

It was my first sermon (after seminary). During the final stanza of the hymn before the sermon, I walked up the steps inside the sacristy toward a narrow door. On the other side was the raised pulpit and God's people, expecting me to be there when they finished the hymn. Back inside the sacristy, I got half way up the steps, turned around and sat down and said, "Lord, I can't do this." Thankfully, it was a hymn with long stanzas.

Countless times in almost 30 years of ministry I have said those words: walking up to the door of a long-time member and dear friend who is

caught in a sin and needs a stern rebuke; taking two young boys, ages 4 and 6, into a hospital room to say good-bye to their dying father; preparing the third sermon in as many days because of two funerals and tomorrow is Sunday. "Lord, I can't do this." And he says, "I will be with you." "Your competence comes from me."

*Countless times in almost 30 years of ministry I have said, "Lord, I can't do this."*

Who am I that I should go? Who of us has not asked the question? But who better to proclaim the strength of the LORD than those who have felt their own weakness? Who better to proclaim the Law in all of its severity than those who have been crushed and broken by its hammer blows? And who better to proclaim mercy and grace than those who have experienced it firsthand?

Who am I that I should go? I struggle with my sinful flesh. It tells me it's too hard. I can't do it. It will take too much from me. It tells me God should be satisfied with half-hearted efforts (because, after all, I do more than most people around here) and that there is no need for improvement in my preaching (because, like all pastors, I'm above average).

So I must continue to apply God's truth to my own life and ministry. Fight against my sinful flesh. Let the Word do its work in me first—convicting me of my arrogance in thinking that the work is mine and convicting me of my laziness in thinking that God should be satisfied with meager efforts. Let the Word do its work in me first as I kneel before the cross and see all my sins on Jesus and hear his amazing promise that I am forgiven and loved. Then I am competent. Then I am ready. Then I say, "Here, am I, send me."



# How's my preaching?

You've seen the signs on the back of trucks. "How's my driving? Call..." Do you think the driver really wants you to call? How about a sign on our pulpits, "How's my preaching? Call..." Honest feedback can be difficult to hear. We don't like criticism. Our members know we don't want to hear:

*"Long sermon today, Pastor. You lost me for the last 5 minutes."  
"Funny story, just not sure where you were going with it."  
"Thought I understood that until you preached on it."*

So it's "good sermon, pastor" from Barnabas-like members. Over lunch, my wife is a little more direct, but she, too, knows that if she is too critical it will sour my mood.

So where do we gather honest feedback? Maybe...

- Occasionally send our sermons to a trusted colleague, i.e. the circuit pastor or a classmate.
- Smile at our wife and say, "thanks, honey", instead of a rant that if people don't know who Micaiah is that isn't our fault.
- Carefully chose a few members—a group that you rotate—to provide regular feedback.

In preparation for this volume of the *Preach the Word*, I sent out a survey to several people whose sanctified judgment I trust. I read Professor Richard Gurgel's survey work from a few years ago, which he graciously shared with me. Before I get into the constructive criticisms, I want to make clear that the responses

were overwhelmingly positive and encouraging. Comments like the following predominated:

- *(I commend) the persistence, dedication and love for the Word of God (of) WELS preachers.*
- *(Our pastors) earnestly desire that their message is edifying to the listeners and is pleasing to God.*
- *"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you... (Php 1:3-11)*
- *The strengths I see most frequently evidenced in WELS sermons are the consistent focus on the literal truth of the Bible and the application of law and gospel to contemporary life.*
- *I am deeply grateful for the tremendous investment of scholarship and preparation that our pastors regularly devote to their opportunities to share God's Word... Our pastors tackle a uniquely challenging teaching task with admirable dedication and energy.*

But I asked how they thought our preaching could be better. And they provided some honest answers. Lord willing, I'll share them over the next six issues.



## How can I improve my preaching?

### "Be excited to tell me about the love of Jesus."

In Herman Melville's novel, *White Jacket*, the ship's surgeon, Dr. Cuticle, is performing an operation. A sailor's leg must be amputated. Since the ship is in port, Cuticle invites other surgeons to observe. As they gather, he launches into a detailed lecture about his superior surgical techniques. As he proceeds with the amputation, the patient is in obvious distress, crying out in pain. But Cuticle seems oblivious as he continues his dissertation:

*"Young gentlemen, you will perceive that precisely at this spot—here—to which I previously directed your attention—at the corresponding spot precisely—the operation has been performed. About here, young gentlemen, ... the great artery was. But you noticed that I did not use the tourniquet..."*

He drones on about his methods, about the latest medical theories. Finally, someone interrupts, "Sir, the patient is dead." Untouched, Cuticle replies, "I predicted that...; he was very much run down," and walks calmly away.

Many of the survey responses had to do with emotion in our preaching:

- Appropriate expression of passion and enthusiasm is at times lacking.
- (The sermon) often takes the tone of a history lesson rather than a Gospel message.
- Sometimes appears to lack true joy and happiness.
- When the zeal to spread the Gospel in response to free grace is expressed with the same verbal flatness that was used for an introductory anecdote about Aunt Tilly's funeral, an important opportunity to guide comprehension and response is missed.
- (I often) feel like (pastors) are preaching their seminary notes.
- Monotone voice, uninspiring attitude, impersonal approach, and lack of connection with people too often detracts and hinders the communication of the Gospel.
- If the pastor is not passionate about the Word, why should the congregation be?

In *The Theology of the Cross*, Professor Daniel Deuschlander writes:

The heart surgeon who has performed one thousand bypass operations no longer thinks of doing a heart bypass the way he did when he performed his first.... This amazing surgery may become routine for him. The pastor can fall into the same kind of thinking.... If he gave up on his private devotional life when he was younger, it would be very easy indeed for him to slip into the attitude of the professional religious person.... (His) vocation has degenerated into a business.... He has about as much love for his people as the grocer might have for the customer in the aisle.... His sermons have begun to sound all the same.... It becomes his habit to drone on in general terms about the text...with applications that will neither inspire nor bother anyone.... (p. 208-209)

*"He has about as much love for his people as the grocer might have for the customer in the aisle."*

Enthusiasm from the pulpit does not (as one survey respondent put it) require the frantic patter of a used-car salesman. We all have our own unique personality and communication style. No one appreciates fake enthusiasm or a preacher trying to be somebody he is not. But there is a genuine joy that accompanies the privilege of sharing the Gospel and it ought to be evident.

Sometimes, when we feel our preaching is getting a little dry and lifeless, there is a temptation to think we need a change in methodology—a new way to communicate the old message.

*"I heard narrative preaching is popular. Maybe I should try that; whatever narrative preaching is."*

*"Maybe I should try a first person sermon. Dress up like John the Baptist or something."*

Before we try any new techniques, let's check something more basic. Are we are letting the Word speak to us before we speak the

Word to others? I heard one pastor lament, "I'm just too busy being a pastor to follow Jesus." Could it be that our joy and enthusiasm isn't as evident as it once was because we have gotten too busy in the Jesus business to have much time for Jesus himself?

*Have we gotten too busy in the Jesus business to have much time for Jesus himself?*

Jesus doesn't just want to use you to bring mercy and forgiveness to others. Jesus wants to give you mercy and forgiveness. So the next time you visit Elmer and Lydia in assisted living, don't just go to deliver the Gospel. Go to be refreshed in the Gospel yourself. The next time you walk into a classroom of confirmation class students, don't just teach them something about the Bible. Invite them to sit down with you at the feet of Jesus. Go into the preschool class and as you hear their simple confession of faith, marvel that "God has hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" (Mt 11:25). Sit down at the edge of the hospice patient's bed, and talk about the joys awaiting us in heaven. And remember—it's your hope, too. And it is certain, because it is grace, all grace. As you share God's great exchange on that evangelism call, let your heart thrill to know that Jesus did this for you, too. And as you approach your text study, don't be like Dr. Cuticle, a cold professional. Be a disciple sitting at the feet of his Master. Don't just deliver the goods. Receive them, too.

And don't cheat yourself out of your time to meet with Jesus—your personal devotional time. Guard that time as though your life depended on it (Dt 32:46-47). He invites you: "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened" (Mt 11:25). Beneath his cross, in the forgiveness of your own sins, you find not only rest, but your passion to proclaim him to others (2 Co 5:14).

A 17th century preacher said: "I will preach as if I'll never preach again: as a dying man to dying men." God grant it.



## Preaching Thoughts for the Season of End Time

During the season in which we are encouraged to be faithful to the Word (Reformation), mindful of the judgment (Last Judgment), watchful for our triumph at Christ's coming again (Saints Triumphant), and joyful in the reign of Christ (Christ the King) [from *Planning Christian Worship – Year A* by Jonathan Schroeder], the following may serve as illustrations or to stimulate your own thoughts for application.

***Heaven Is for Real.*** This book spent over 50 weeks at #1 on the *NY Times* bestseller list. This past April, it was made into a movie that has earned just under \$100,000,000.

It is the story of Colton, a 4-year-old boy, who had a near death experience during an emergency appendectomy. But what sets this story apart from the literally millions of other near death experiences, is that afterward Colton seemed to know things that would seem highly unlikely for him to have learned during the normal course of his life. For example, he described his great grandfather, whom he had never met and told of spending time with him in heaven; he said he met his sister, who died in the womb, and whom he had never been told about; and he described in detail what his parents were doing while he was in surgery.

But what fascinates me is not the story, but people's reaction to it. Polls say that 90% of Americans believe in the afterlife, and

the popularity of Colton's story says they clearly want to know more about it. Blogs on this book/movie are filled with comments by people who have recently lost loved ones—in many cases children—telling of the comfort they have found in this story's assurance that heaven is for real and that their loved ones are in a beautiful, loving place.

We believe that heaven is real not because a little boy spent time with his great-grandfather, met his sister, or rode on a rainbow colored pony with Jesus. We know that heaven is real because our Jesus said, "In my Father's house are many rooms.... I am going there to prepare a place for you, and...I will come again to take you to be with me" (Jn 14).

And that's what makes it heaven, isn't it? Not all the leisure activities and all the natural beauty we've ever imagined, all without sickness or sorrow, or conflict of any kind. No, what makes it heaven is Jesus. We will meet him face-to-face, the one who loves us so much that he carried our sins to his cross, the one whose perfect life of obedience and whose sacrificial death earned our place in heaven, the one who has been with us the whole time, guiding and protecting us. As we wait, let's not just read books and watch movies—let's tell as many people as we can, as often as we can, about the One who made it possible, who is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.

(This information was gathered from various online resources, particularly ThomasNelson.com.)

They both have cancer.

Shakespeare fans might recognize the title from a line in *Julius Caesar*, as Cassius says, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves...."

Ironically, the quote is expressing the opposite viewpoint from the book and movie. Author John Green's point seems to be that bad things happen—in this case cancer—to good people, through no fault of their own. It's in the stars—which, when it comes right down to it, is another way of blaming God. He's supposed to be watching over us, isn't he? Actually, John Green doesn't seem to blame God as much as he points out that the Christians around these two teenagers have no real answers to human suffering. Shakespeare is closer to the truth. Human suffering is the result of our own choices, the choices of others and the choice that our first parents made in the Garden of Eden.

It's a waste of time to blame the stars or to blame God. Scripture offers a different approach. Jesus came to endure all our suffering and heartache (Is 53), including suffering the damnation our sins deserved. In so doing he brings us the certain hope of one day standing with him in glory (2 Co 4:16-18). Unlike the Christians portrayed in the book, we can point people to the cause of suffering, and the only answer—Jesus.

(*The Fault in our Stars*, by John Green; Dutton Books, 2012. The movie was released in June, 2014.)

***The Fault in Our Stars***, currently a "young adult" #1 bestseller and a critically acclaimed movie released this past summer, is your typical boy meets girl romance, but with a twist.



Pastor David Kolander shared his worship plan for the End Time season based on the CWS Epistles. You can find more of his plan work at <https://connect.wels.net/worship> under Planning for Worship.

End Time Theme	"Safely to His Heavenly Kingdom"	CWS Year A		Hymns	Service
11/2/2014	ET 1 Reform	2 Timothy 4:9-18	Safely to His Heavenly Kingdom	753 (1-3) - 200 - 204 - 203	DS 2
11/9/2014	ET 2 Last J	Romans 2:2-11	God's Kindness Leads to Repentance	x - 749 (1-2) - 209 - 211	38 with Gathering Rite
11/16/2014	ET 3 Saints T	Revelation 19:1-9	"Let Us Rejoice and Be Glad"	206 - 729 - 730 - 215	26
11/23/2014	ET 4 Christ t K	1 Corinthians 15:20-28	The Last Enemy Is Destroyed	217 - 434 - 727 - 214 (1,4)	DS 1