

Treasures Old and New *Lectionary Abundance*

By Joel J. Gawrisch

Ah, the exquisite agony of a “difficult” decision: taking it all in, evaluating the options, narrowing the choices, flopping back-and-forth, making a choice, taking possession, experiencing some buyer’s remorse, then joyful satisfaction. And that’s just what your average church-goer experiences every Sunday as he decides which home-baked treat(s) to have with his coffee during fellowship hour. But consider the difference if the decision involves a salad bar. The decision-making process is easier. Nearly all of the items are good for you. The only guidelines are your personal likes, the size of your plate, and the number of trips you are allowed to make.

As you enter once again the treasure house of God’s Word through the lectionary you find yourself in a similar situation. A new week has begun. You look at the appointed lessons and their summaries. You take the time to see how they fit together for that day and how they fit into the grand progression of the church year. It is all laid out for you to behold. There is so much to choose from and it is all good for you. There is no agony, just exquisite joy in taking it all in. You could, and will, delight in its glorious nourishment for eternity.

And yet you have been called by a gathering of believers to bring forth from the storehouse treasure which will be nourishing to them. As much as you enter the storehouse to your own blessing, your primary purpose is on behalf of the people you have been called to serve. Yet your intimate relationship with your Lord and your specific training for this work sets you up for a difficult decision—the exquisite agony of deciding what you will proclaim to those same believers through your preaching... and what you will not.

Comedian Jerry Seinfeld once noted that the number two greatest fear of people is death. The number one greatest fear is public speaking. In other words, he concluded, people would

rather be in the coffin at a funeral than giving the eulogy. Because of this fear of public speaking, those new to it invariably begin with a hope for brevity by asking themselves, “How long does this need to be?” I know few preachers who ask themselves that question, and for good reason. The storehouse of God’s Word is an abundance from which to bring forth treasure after treasure. There is no shortage of material. But considering this abundance of the Word and a preacher’s call to representative ministry, perhaps he ought to still ask a similar question from time to time, “How long *should* this be?”

I resemble that remark

Yes, the focus of this article is indeed on the length of a sermon. (Go ahead and assume a defensive position.) Seriously or semi-seriously, all preachers have been chided for long-winded preaching. Most preachers recognize that this chiding comes with the job. A preacher is out there speaking in public. The public, therefore, has many and varied opinions on both the preacher and the preaching. Up for commentary by the public (parishioners) is everything from content to creativity, from authenticity to energy. But nothing empowers a parishioner to complain to a preacher more than a sermon that is too long.

The preacher, of course, is ready with a host of sanctified (and not-so-sanctified) responses: “People ought to be able to listen to a 30-minute sermon.” “The text required this amount of time.” “The Spirit works as he wills.” “People are always looking for something to complain about.” “This is the way God made me to preach.” Sadly, these comments are often received as more sanctimonious than sanctified, especially by those who are truly struggling against the flesh to stay focused and attentive to the Word of the Lord and the preacher who is proclaiming it.

Would not a faithful preacher take the time to receive these comments as constructive criticism and seek to understand their purposive nature? As blogger Thom Schultz points out, the comments may reflect the lower retention rates of the lecture method, the shrinking of modern-day attention spans, the passivity of parishioners listening in the pews, and the paucity of auditory learners (as opposed to visual and physical).¹ Additionally, parishioners may have specific expectations regarding not just the length of the sermon, but also the length of the service. Such expectations are typically neither right nor wrong in and of themselves. Faithfulness to God's people leads the preacher to lovingly honor them, and when necessary, patiently adjust them. Faithfulness to the Lord leads the preacher to honestly wrestle with the difficult question, "How long *should* this be?" Ah, the exquisite agony of a difficult decision. "What will I share... and what will I not?"

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A very good place to start

Let's face it, the Spirit's blessing of sanctification and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary homiletical training are to blame for the difficulty of the decision. The Spirit's blessing instills in preachers a deep love for the Word, a heart for people battling the darkness



of sin and unbelief, an aptitude to proclaim healing and hope, and a desire to share what is desperately needed. Homiletical training provides a systematic approach to exploring the storehouse of God's Word, expositing the treasures within, purposely summarizing and applying those treasures to the lives of listeners, and coherently communicating them. All of this comes together for the preacher as he finds himself readily assenting to the oft-quoted statement: There truly are 100 sermons in every text. The treasure is so abundant!

To illustrate the point, consider *The Preacher's Apprentice*. Pastor Mark Cordes has been publishing this dynamic dictionary since 1999. Each reading in the lectionary is exhaustively studied, most texts receiving treatment in 40-60 pages.² The abundance is overwhelming, and yet the opportunity to delight in the Word of the Lord is spiritually enthralling. Pastor John Koelpin also wrote of this abundant treasure and the challenging joy of Scriptural mining in PTW's Volume 5 #4.

Text study is hard work, but it is exhilarating. For sinners it is perhaps as close as we can get to gazing at the jewels of heaven that John beheld in his revelation. As the preacher turns his text inside and out—studying it in its immediate context, looking at it in the wider context of the entire Bible, picking it apart word by word and phrase by phrase in the original, and viewing it through the eyes of previous confessors—he finds a bit of gold here and some shining sapphire there, just waiting to be displayed before the hearts of God's people. Like the prophets of old we "search intently and with the greatest care" (1 Peter 1:10).

A good preacher loves his time in the Word studying the text. Yet the abundance of treasure leaves the preacher with the exquisite agony of a difficult decision: choosing the treasure to summarize and display in a faithful, applicable, and timely way. "Prince of Preachers" Charles Spurgeon said of sermon length, "We are generally longest when we have least to say."³ As true as that may be for some, this author contends that the primary cause of lengthy sermons in WELS is that there so *much* to say and preachers want to proclaim it all!

After exhaustive research and careful crafting, a budding Junior seminarian once proudly turned in the manuscript of his first sermon. Eagerly he awaited feedback from his homiletics professor, anticipating that the sheer volume of biblical exposition within its pages would translate into equally abundant accolades for its author. Imagine his disappointment when the professor simply commented, "Good work, but save some for next week."

Perhaps the most common advice from the pew for long-winded preachers is simply "Don't preach so long," as if a preacher could simply set an alarm and stop talking at the "bell." Yet equally ridiculous is an approach that meanders through the results of a text study, recycles similar thoughts within the sermon *ad nauseum*, or strings together a series of stories with some vague references to a text. Such ramblings invite critical commentary and rightly serve as a reminder to work at crafting the message.



Telic like it is

To put it simply, the point is the point. Even a ten-minute sermon can seem long if it is struggling to bring out the main thrust of the text. Faced with an abundance of treasure discovered during text study and as interesting as all those treasures may be, keep the message focused on the main point. Save some treasures for a Bible study, a blog, “take home” materials for use during the week⁴, or three years later when the text and its related readings come up again. The storehouse is filled with treasure, yet the preacher’s goal is to help his hearers to focus on that one pearl, that one gem that the Spirit will use as he wills. As one bishop was fond of telling his vicars, “Provide the nail on which people can hang their hats.”

Goal for it

Setting a goal that is in keeping with both biblical *and* local expectations will greatly help direct the process of crafting a message for God’s people. The most impactful advice this author has received for sermon length came from a Taste of Ministry experience during high school. The host pastor explained that he knew how long it typically took him to preach so many words. He would set his word-count goal and craft his sermon with the goal in mind.

Certainly this approach could lead to slavish adherence to meeting an arbitrary goal at the expense of faithful exposition of a given text. Yet in nearly 20 years of this author’s preaching, a word-count goal has led to a plethora of blessings. Such an approach has led to critical editing, re-working of outlines, the elimination

of interesting yet inessential illustrations, and an overall striving for excellence. Good “stuff” has been left on the cutting room floor. Yet the final result from this is a better-crafted message. Essentially, if the length of the sermon goes beyond the word-count goal, it better be worth it.

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It’s all in the timing

Give yourself plenty of time for crafting, especially if you tend to leave your “sermonizing” to the last minute. Sadly, many preachers are still working on their sermons into the late hours of Saturday night or even the early hours of Sunday morning. Assuming that there has been faithful text study, a message has now been prepared, but how much time has been dedicated to rework? If you find yourself regularly ad libbing during your presentation, or have used the phrase “and that’s another thing” while you are holding forth (yes, this has happened), consider setting aside more time for honing and crafting your message. Give your sermon the priority that proclamation of the Word deserves. Give yourself the time to craft a message in keeping with the gifts God has given you. Make use of fellow believers who can offer constructively critical feedback both after and *before* you preach. Many a sermon has been preached that could have been better crafted, more clearly communicated, and more succinctly presented simply because the preacher did not take the time to revise.

We are often our own worst enemies. Most preachers get into a rhythm when they preach. They have developed a style, an approach, and a delivery that works for them. These personal aspects to preaching can have a profound impact on the expectations of a congregation, especially when those expectations are in conflict with the personal aspects of the preacher’s preaching. If local expectation is a 20 minute sermon and a 60 minute service, repeatedly preaching and worshiping beyond those expectations will only irritate the sensitivities of the congregation. Lovingly honoring and, when necessary, patiently adjusting those expectations (as encouraged above), can bring preacher and parishioners into a more mutually beneficial harmony. If the preacher desires more time to preach, be willing to patiently help the congregation to see the blessings of a 70 minute service to allow for it. If the service on a given Sunday will include worship aspects like baptisms, Holy Communion, and confirmations, be willing to preach a shorter sermon, recognizing that the means of grace are still active and working through all aspects of corporate worship. If sermon length is truly an issue, take time with your Elders and other mature Christians in your congregation to find out what will best serve the flock. Forcing parishioners to listen to long sermons again and again does not eventually lead to a love for long sermons.

“More” myth

Reconciling “less is more” with “more is better” can be quite the challenge. Yet these phrases have often become axioms to the listener in the pew. A balanced viewpoint recognizes that “Less is [not necessarily] more” and “More is [not necessarily] better.” Generational bias can stimulate this quantity vs. quality struggle not only within the congregation, but also within the preacher. Challenging personal bias towards long or short preaching is a healthy thing to do. Allow the circumstances, context, and occasion to help you craft a message to the edification of God’s people. After all, Jesus once preached a precipitous sermon that lasted all day, yet he was also mindful of his disciples’ limitations, “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth” (John 16:12,13).

Time’s up

Practicing what this article preaches, it was sent to a fellow pastor for feedback. In his response he shared that his congregation had made the move to every-Sunday celebration of the Sacrament. At the time, there was concern about over-all service length.

I didn’t want service length to serve as an obstacle to appreciating the gifts of the Supper. And so I set out to change how I preached. What I found is that in my 22-minute sermons, I wasn’t speaking as clearly and specifically as I could have. I had grown comfortable in saying things in certain ways. That 22-minute mark fit like my well-broken-in slippers. I started spending more time in text study and more time in revision. It wasn’t an easy process. It is harder for me to preach for 16 minutes than 22. But I have appreciated the results. My sermons are more focused now and there has been a renewed interest and appreciation for the whole sermonic process.

Ah, the exquisite agony of difficult decisions and the immeasurable blessings of a well-crafted sermon, all from the abundance of treasure found in the storehouse of God’s Word. The power of our great God is such that he can work just as effectively through an eight-minute sermon as he can a 45-minute sermon. We may not have a biblical formula for the perfect length of a sermon, but we do have a perfect God. He uses imperfect preachers who have been given the grace to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ.

This article is also available at wels.net/blogs/worship-blogs. We welcome your comments or questions.



- ¹ <https://holysoup.com/the-perfect-length-for-a-sermon/>.
- ² For information on *The Preacher’s Apprentice*, contact Pastor Mark Cordes – m.cordes@comcast.net. A sample study for Easter 4B Good Shepherd Sunday is provided online at worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/preach-the-word-volume-21.
- ³ Charles Spurgeon *Lectures*, p. 135.
- ⁴ For example, the preacher need not take the time during the sermon to describe the topography around the Sea of Galilee. He could point his listeners to a supplemental resource like *Israel on Drone – Sea of Galilee* (youtube.com/watch?v=zIV8HBmL6ek) in pre-service announcements. A preacher mindful of the progression of the liturgy could even provide a link like this the previous week.

Treasures from the Archive

With twenty years of archives to hand, there is a storehouse of treasure to behold in past issues. The following abbreviated article speaks to one of the many blessings that comes from careful reworking.

Leading the listener right up to the well without giving him a drink is a common pitfall in writing sermons, particularly for young homileticians. The preacher engages the listener with one link added to another in his chain of thought. Then suddenly the chain is broken. The preacher leaves the thought unfinished but in the process also leaves the listener scrambling to find the connection to what is said subsequently.

It is a common mistake. We are so filled with the message of the Word we are delivering, we assume our listeners know what we are talking about and what we are going to say next. We mistakenly think that the final statement in our line of thought is so obvious we don’t need to say it. Often the statement we leave out is a key that links what we have said to what is coming. Those obvious thoughts left unsaid leave the real punch out of the message.

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