

Regarding the Christian Sermon

In our Divine Service, there are two high points – the sermon and the sacrament. They have been described as two peaks of the same mountain. From the earliest days of the Church, men have gone out to preach. Already in Genesis 4 we read, “At that time, men began to call on the name of the LORD.” (Genesis 4:26) This refers to their services. If they were calling on the name of the Lord, it also means that they were speaking in his name, that is, preaching.

This continues to be God’s will. Jesus gave this charge to his Church: “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.” (Mark 16:15) Of course, this word was not just for the lost. God’s people gather regularly to be strengthened and encouraged by that same preaching. “They (i.e., the early Christian Church) devoted themselves to the apostles’ teachings and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” (Acts 2:42)

Scripture gives this charge to pastors: “Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. . . . Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.” (1 Timothy 4:13,16) Preaching and teaching are what the Lord charges pastors to do.

In order for Christians to get the most out of the sermons that are preached, this little primer has been drafted for your consideration. While there may be other things that can be added to enhance your listening, let this serve as a starting point.

Preacher, Know Your Listeners

Whether or not the preacher has an intimate knowledge of his parishioners, he knows this much: They are sinners. Some parishioners are bothered by this reality. Others, not so much. The preacher knows that his listeners have thought, said, and done wicked things. Most likely, they are not guilty of criminal activities. For this reason, many of the listeners might feel like there is nothing wrong with them, nothing really to fear. As much as the pastor loves the people he is serving, he must destroy their sense of security in themselves. He must expose their wickedness. He must convict them of their sin. He must let no one off the hook.

The preacher is not being vindictive when he does this. He is like a surgeon who must cut into a patient in order to help him. We know that a surgeon must create a wound in order to save a patient. The preacher does something similar. Only, the preacher does not wound; he puts to death.

The preacher is preaching to sinners. They have earned God’s wrath. God’s curse rests upon them for their sin. They cannot fix this. A preacher does no favors to his listeners if he tries to teach them to behave. A preacher’s job is not to get people to stop cursing, lying, stealing, fornicating, etc. . . . Those are merely symptoms of a much deeper problem. Even if all of the people stopped doing all these sinful things, they are still sinners. They cannot fix this. And try as they might, they will not be able to stop doing the sinful things either. That is the wretched condition of the sinner. The preacher must proclaim this so that the listener will give up any hope of trying to fix or improve or save himself. He is lost. When he finally realizes that being saved can only happen if someone else does the saving, then he is ready to hear the gospel.

While the preacher knows that he is addressing sinners, he also knows that every single person he speaks to is a person that God loves so much that he gave his Son for him or her. These are people for whom Jesus Christ came, lived, suffered, and died. Jesus bled for every last one of them so that they can find relief from their guilt, comfort for their souls, and confidence that a place in heaven awaits them.

No matter how many times Christians have heard this good news, they need to hear it again and again. For each Christian, his salvation is secure. That does not mean, however, that

his problems are over. On the contrary, they often increase. Satan does not leave God's people alone. The world hates those who believe that everyone will perish unless they repent. The Christian is not that surprised that he will suffer hardships from Satan and the world attacking him. For most, the greatest trouble of all comes from his struggle with his own sinful flesh.

The Christian has no desire to sin, but he keeps on doing it all the same. He fights against temptation, and he often loses. He feels the burden of guilt. He experiences hardships that eclipse the peace that God gives. He is afflicted with pain and suffering in his sin-corrupted body. He is grieved by the heinous deeds that sinners do; and he is doubly grieved that such acts are tolerated and even praised by others. He wonders if he is alone in his faith. He wonders if it is worth continuing in that faith.

The preacher knows that this is what the Christian drags with him into God's house. He knows it, because he is one of them. He knows that his parishioners are not going to find comfort from upbeat speeches and slick pep talks. He knows that the only encouragement and comfort they will find is from a Savior who has delivered them from their sinful condition and will finally deliver them from this wicked world to the joys of heaven. And since he knows that the journey heavenward is often decades long for most of his listeners, he repeats God's promises of mercy to them again and again. This is the only thing that will sustain them; for this is what Christians' lives are founded on. Jesus is the only hope we have.

Listeners, Know Your Preacher

Preaching – faithful preaching – is what the Lord charges pastors to do. Christians expect this from their pastors, and rightfully so. However, Scripture warns: “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.” (Matthew 7:15) While the Lord holds the preacher responsible for the message he preaches, the listeners are still judged as individuals. Just as Eve was not excused for being deceived by the serpent, neither will anyone who is deceived by a false prophet. Listeners, know your preacher!

When people think of what they want in a preacher, they often gravitate toward the wrong things. Naturally, we would like to have a gifted speaker who is entertaining, engaging, and personable. Some even say that they want their preacher to employ humor in his sermons. Such things might make paying attention to a sermon much easier, but none of these things saves a single soul from hell. Just because a preacher is gifted or personable does not mean that he is right. Just because a preacher is popular does not mean that he is faithful. And if a preacher relies on humor, he has appointed himself as a divine entertainer. He will hold his crowd only as long as his material is good. While Jesus was not a killjoy, neither was he a comedian. There is nothing funny about souls that are dying. There are no chuckles in heaven over the rebellion of sinners or over their judgment. There was certainly nothing funny about Jesus' innocent sufferings and death. Since God does not make light of these things, why would anyone expect that from the pulpit? Laughter may alleviate stress, but it does not forgive sins. God's mercy is not found in humor, but in the atoning death of Jesus.

What should you expect from your preacher? You should expect at least the following things.

Hark! A Herald!

A herald had a very simple job: Deliver the king's message. It is not the job of a herald to put his spin on the king's message. It is not the job of a herald to convince his listeners that the king's message is important. It is not the job of a herald to make them believe it. It is certainly out of bounds for the herald to change the king's message. He simply gets the message from the king and delivers the message to the people.

When Jesus commissioned his disciples to “preach the gospel,” the Greek word for “preach” actually means to “herald.” The pastor, therefore, is not to enhance the gospel, put his

spin on the gospel, or to alter the gospel. He simply is to declare, "This is what the Lord says." And it had better be what the Lord says! God's people have been entrusted with the Scriptures, so they are able to judge for themselves if their preacher is faithful to the Lord or a ferocious wolf (despite his attractive, seemingly harmless sheep's clothing) who would destroy the flock with a false gospel.

I'm Sorry, Did You Say Something?

The problem with much preaching is not preachers saying things which defy God. The more common problem is that preachers ultimately say nothing. They can fill 20 minutes and keep your attention for the whole time with interesting facts and amusing anecdotes. They can refer to Bible lessons and Biblical characters. They can even give helpful advice regarding this or that problem. In the end, Christians often feel that they have heard a wonderful message when, in actuality, they have heard nothing. There is no call to repentance; just encouragement to behave better or differently. There is no mention of Jesus' atoning sacrifice. This makes sense, because the preacher never suggests that people needed to be saved from anything. While we could not say that such a preacher says anything wrong, neither could we say that he preaches the gospel.

This is, perhaps, the most dangerous kind of preaching. Why?

- 1) The preacher says nothing that is untrue.
- 2) The preacher makes references to the Bible. Therefore, Christians are convinced that they heard the gospel.
- 3) The preacher's delivery is engaging, filled with good stories and interesting statistics. Therefore, he holds the attention of his hearers well.
- 4) The listener feels good about himself afterwards.

This is the kind of preaching that lulls faith to sleep. This is the kind of preaching that makes Christians easy prey for the roaring lion who goes around looking for someone to devour. If Christians are not urged to take refuge in Jesus Christ who has lived and died for them, they are left defenseless.

Expect your preacher to say something substantial. And the substance of every sermon must be Jesus Christ and him crucified.

"Sir, We Would Like To See Jesus"

"Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the feast. They came to Philip ... with a request. 'Sir,' they said, 'we would like to see Jesus.'" (John 12:20,21)

These Greeks, it would seem, were interested in something more than meeting a popular man. When they were brought to Jesus, he got right to the point. He spoke of his imminent sufferings and death. The Greeks were, presumably, eager to know about the mercies of God. Those mercies are found in Jesus' sacrificial death. That is where sins are paid for. That is where atonement was made. That is where God's punishment was lifted from us and forgiveness was secured for all mankind.

Now, there are many things that can be said about Jesus, and much of them would be true. He was a prophet. He was a great teacher. He cared for people. He healed many. He fed the multitudes. He performed miraculous signs and wonders. He was nailed to a cross and died just outside Jerusalem. These are all facts that even ardent critics of the Bible will accept as true (well, maybe except for the miracles). But preaching is not about reciting facts about Jesus' life. This is not time for trivia. Trivia is not the gospel.

Nor is Jesus to be touted as the example we all must follow. To be sure, Jesus is a wonderful example. In fact, he is a perfect example because he is, well, perfect. So, how are you doing as you try to live up to Jesus' example?

We would have to be willfully blind if we believe that we are doing what Jesus did. In fact, if your life is guided by *WWJD?*, you will either become a Pharisee who is convinced that

you are, indeed, doing WJD, or you will be driven to despair because you recognize that you can never do WJD. We are kidding ourselves if we think we can. Jesus did not come to issue new commandments for us to obey. We have not obeyed the original ones. If we could, we would not need Jesus. Jesus did not come to demonstrate how to live a holy life; he came precisely because we have *not* lived a holy life. We don't need an example. We need a Savior. And that is what God has provided us.

"Sir, we would like to see Jesus." This Jesus whom the Father sent for us must be proclaimed as Savior. If he is a Savior, then he is our substitute. If he is our substitute, then he is the one who takes our sins, suffers our punishment, dies our death, and experiences our hell. He was made our sin so that we could become his righteousness. Jesus does not provide our righteousness by setting us an example of it. He provides righteousness as our substitute, answering God's holy Law for us.

Through Jesus Christ, God remains both merciful and just. He is just because he punishes all who are guilty of sin – Jesus in the stead of mankind. He is just because he grants heaven to all who are holy and blameless – the new status we have by faith in Jesus. And he is merciful – for we do not deserve any of this. Yet, Jesus supplies it freely and gladly.

This is the Jesus that all the world needs. This is the Jesus that God's people should expect to have proclaimed to them; for this is the Jesus who saves.

The Place Where You Are Standing Is Holy Ground

America has increasingly become a very informal society. Not too many years ago, men used to wear suits and fedoras to baseball games. (Remember the photos from the 1950's?) People greeted one another with "Mr." and "Mrs." or with other appropriate titles. Today, we are quite familiar with each other. Now we listen to Dr. Phil and Judge Judy. Children call their teachers Miss Margie. Whether or not this is better is open to debate. (Although, please refer to me as "Pastor" or "Pastor Schroeder." This is not for my ego, but rather for respect of the office. After all, who would you rather have visit you at your hospital bed – "Pastor" or "Tom"? But this is a whole other topic...)

Our informality and familiarity have made their way into places where they are not desirable. One of those places is in the Divine Service. Informality is not only unseemly in the Divine Service, it approaches blasphemy – if it has not, indeed, already crossed that line.

When Moses approached the burning bush, God called to Moses: "Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." (Exodus 3:5) Moses' response? He did not try to get chummy. "Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God." (Exodus 3:6) There are many similar instances throughout the Bible where men trembled at the presence of God. They knew that God was holy. They responded appropriately. It was neither the time nor the place to be casual. In a few instances where men did try to treat God casually or served the Lord carelessly, they were put to death by the Lord. The Old Testament people learned their lessons well – God is holy. He is not to be trifled with.

The pastor is responsible for demonstrating this same reverence in his entire conduct of the Divine Service. It is not show time. It is God's service. He is not on stage. He dares to stand on holy ground only because God has called him to do so. If God's people are going to approach God with reverence and awe, the pastor must set that tone with the appropriate conduct.

This same conduct is to be carried on in the pulpit. The pastor stands in the stead of Jesus Christ to proclaim His gospel to His people. The Savior loves his people dearly, but he is still God. The preacher should remember this; and he should preach like he does. God's mercy is not found in making God a harmless, naïve, grandfatherly-type God. Dragging God down to make him familiar and less threatening only makes sinners comfortable with their sinfulness.

At the same time, dragging God down to make him familiar makes it hard to take his atonement seriously. If the preacher is casual about God and about being in God's presence, he

presents God as one who is a buddy, an equal. But Jesus does not bring us comfort because he is our buddy. Jesus brings us comfort because he is the atoning sacrifice for our sin.

Jesus is not our equal. He is our Lord. This is why his words and works comfort us. It is *God* who has had mercy upon us. It is *God* who became flesh to live for us and supply our righteousness. It is *God* who went to the cross to suffer and die for us. And, therefore, it is *God* who proclaims his gracious salvation to us. Since it is *God's* word, it stands firm. Nothing can overrule what God says. Therefore, our hope and our confidence also stand firm. We can be sure that we will dwell on holy ground for all eternity.

Stand Up, Speak Up, Shut Up

God's people need their preacher to lead them to put their sinful nature to death through repentance. They need their preacher to lead them to Jesus for God's mercy, forgiveness, and salvation. These things are essential. If they are absent, then it was not a Christian sermon. It may have been entertaining, engaging, or informative, but it was not a Christian sermon. In every Christian sermon, the listener must be put to death and raised back to life by Jesus. This is the preacher's task. If he fails at these things, he sins against God and against God's people. If he fulfills this task, God's people are blessed. If the sermon also proves to be engaging and informative, that is a bonus.

It has been said that the job of any public speaker is to stand up, speak up, and shut up. For the preacher, it is God who gives him what to say when he stands up. It is Christ crucified he must proclaim when he speaks up. When it comes to his whimsy or his opinions, he should shut up. The preacher is not there to entertain. Hollywood's job is to entertain. The preacher's job is to declare the word of the Lord.

Are You Talking To Me? Are *You* Talking To *ME*?

God has given his word to the world. Just as the whole world has fallen under God's curse because of sin, so God also sent his Son for the whole world to save them. Therefore, God wants his word to be proclaimed to all people. You will notice, however, that all the world is not in our church on any given Sunday. And while we would like to call everyone to repentance, they are not all present to hear that call.

Sadly, Christians often think of how God's word applies to other people. Sure, congressman X might be a thief and a liar. Sure, celebrity Y might be an adulterer and an addict. Sure, the Z family might be obscene and self-centered. If so, it is true that God's word stands against them. But the job of the preacher is not to scold people who are not there. While the listener might be thinking how a particular reading might be just what *they* need, the preacher is not preaching to "*them*." He is preaching to you.

It does the listener no good to think of the countless ways that "Mr. X, Miss Y, and the Z family really needed to hear that message." Maybe so, but they aren't here. You are. That message is for you. It is delivered so you might put to death *your* sin. It is proclaimed to bring comfort and encouragement to *your* soul. It is to assure *you* of *your* salvation when you stand in judgment before the Lord.

The preacher is not preaching to "them." He is preaching God's word to you.

A Dying Man Speaking To Dying Men

As God created the world, the angels sang and shouted for joy. When Jesus came into the world to establish a new creation, the angels sang and shouted for joy. When Jesus conquered death by his glorious resurrection, and again when Jesus ascended to the right hand of the God the Father, angels appeared to speak for God. We have always been impressed by these holy creatures who proclaim God's messages to his people.

But the appearances of angels preaching are actually pretty rare. According to his wisdom, the Lord has chosen to have his word proclaimed by sinful men. The preacher is a frail,

flesh and blood man. As such, the preacher needs God's mercy as much as anyone he preaches to. The first person to receive the sermon is the preacher who prepares it. God's Law kills him first. God's promises restore him first. Then, he has the privilege (and the responsibility – for God has called him to do so) to preach that message.

Since God's people are served by a frail, flesh and blood minister, they ought to recognize that each minister is blessed differently. Some are good preachers. Some are only fair. Sometimes sermons are beautiful. Other times they are weak. Not every sermon will be an award winner. Not every preacher will be a wordsmith. But every preacher is expected to be faithful. "Let the one who has my word speak it faithfully," (Jeremiah 23:28) God says. The preacher is to be faithful with the gifts God has given him. When God's people find a preacher who is faithfully proclaiming sin and grace, law and gospel, they should cherish what God has given them.

More importantly, they should cherish the message which saves them.

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