“Preaching in the 21st Century”

Notes from presentation at Southeastern Wisconsin District Worship Conference

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**PREACHING**

* **person-to-person, oral communication**
* **not just to inform, but to transform**
* **exposing undiscovered treasures from the inspired text**
* **that spotlight an unfathomable Savior**

**Person-to-person, oral communication**

Opening bit: I viewed six online sermons in preparation for this, most used almost no visuals.

Preaching is the preacher speaking to the hearer within a trust relationship (except when the hearer is a first-time visitor).

This is inherent in the Great Commission.

* Jesus chose not to stay and make more disciples himself.
* He told disciples to make disciples (person to person, in trust relationships).
* He promised to be with them always (trust relationship).

It’s inherent in our church set-up.

* You’re a called pastor speaking to your calling congregation.
* Far different from their relationship with their doctor, dentist or coworkers.
* They know you and your family.
* They invited you to live among them/promised to support you & listen to your guidance (tho sometimes unwillingly😊).

It’s inherent in corporate worship.

* The setting makes obvious that you’re the one in authority.
* The gospel—but also the current American milieu—requires you to show gentleness and respect.

Already Aristotle knew that the most powerful component of persuasion is *ethos* (over *logos* & *pathos*)*.*

So keep building relationships with your people and do things that will win their confidence and love:

* Personalize the message.
* Show individual attention, like eye contact (Compliment: “You look like you’re talking just to me.”)
* Put just enough of yourself and your life into the sermon so that you come off as authentic & sincere (you’re not David Gruber.)
* Let the sermon show that you have your hand on the pulse of your people.
* Show your people that you love them. (Then your authority will not be a turn off to them.)

**Not just to inform, but to transform**

Opening bit: The phone is for information-delivery, the laptop is for creating.

The sermon isn’t just for information-delivery. The gospel is a creative force (it works faith).

The sermon’s purpose is to help the hearers chew on the text. When you’re done with the first draft of your sermon, read it and ask yourself at each point: “What am I aiming for my hearers to be thinking here? How do I want them to react?”

* with amazement? (“Wow, I never thought of it from that angle before!”)
* with inquisitiveness? (“Who’s pastor talking about?”)
* weighing ramifications? (“If that’s true, then what about . . .?”)
* appropriating? (of law—“Yeah, I’m guilty of that;” of gospel—“Then there’s hope even for me?!”)

Make it a goal to cause one major moment of awakening (“Aha!” moment) to happen in your hearers’ minds with each sermon. And let the text determine what type of awakening that will be. Scripture often offers the best similes, metaphors, etc., for causing this to happen, e.g. Ps 103:11-12. The similes there are brilliant in describing the nature of God’s mercy because they are easy for people of all eras to grasp and they capture how virtually limitless God’s mercy is.

(Get my hearers thinking about “as high as the heavens are above the earth” with these facts from our current state of knowledge about “the heavens”:)

* Earth’s atmosphere is 300 miles (most of it 10 miles) high
* The moon is 238,900 miles from the earth
* The sun is 93 million miles from the earth.
* Alpha Centauri is 4.2 light years from the earth.

**Exposing undiscovered treasures from the inspired text** (aka. exegeting and expositing the text)

Of course the power lies in the Word.

* Many gospel gems lie in the text waiting for you to discover them.
* Do all you can to mine every nuance out of the text.
* Relish every find and make the most of them in the sermon. Example:

Mark’s version of Jesus and the rich young ruler contains this line at the point where the man smugly claims he has kept the whole law: “Jesus looked at him **and loved him**,” Mk 10:21. Point out how Jesus, who’s headed to Jerusalem with his suffering and death on his mind (10:32-34), who has kept all the law in this young sinner’s place, is so patient and loving with him. He cares enough to challenge the man one more time to help him discover his need for being saved: “Sell all you have and give to the poor.”

Use the awesome tools available today for text study, e.g.,

* Logos
* Enrich your biblical language skills (e.g., attend Hebrew Institute)
* Let Scripture interpret Scripture (Show how I do this using Nestle’s parallel references in the margin.)
* Commentaries (If you find yourself lacking a solid one of these when exegeting a particular text, have sem library scan and send pages to you.)

**That spotlight an unfathomable Savior**

Many texts that occur in our Lutheran series of Lessons have moments intended for awakening in readers/hearers a deeper realization of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. Take the account of Jesus calming the storm as an example (Mk 10:35-41).

Like many Gospel and Old Testament narrative accounts, it’s a “bite-sized,” self-contained unit that is perfect for preaching on. As with other Gospel pericopes, the evangelist seems to want to get the reader/hearer to identify with one or several of the characters. Here we’re clearly meant to identify with the disciples. (We’re often fearful. We think Jesus doesn’t care when we’re “going down.”) And Jesus demonstrates his divine power over all creation by calming the storm. This affords an excellent opportunity to show the linkage between this and the creation account, where God simply spoke, and things came into being. (This provides opportunity for teaching 21st century people with little knowledge of the Bible significant Bible events and their interconnectedness.) By this act, Jesus is showing that he is God himself. But notice how Mark does not state this. Rather he lets the reader/hearer draw this conclusion. As a matter of fact, the Gospel writers are often like movie directors who treat the various events of Jesus’ life like scenes in a movie or episodes of a TV show. And just as the camera man will close the scene by focusing on the face of the character who learned something through the events of the episode, so Mark “gives us a close-up” of the disciples’ faces at the end with their question, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” Note Mark leaves the question unanswered because (I think) he wants his readers/hearers to mull over the question and to experience an awakening of just how much it means that Jesus is God. Craft your sermon in such a way that you lead your hearers to a greater realization and appreciation for who Jesus is and what he’s capable of! Note, this also illustrates that what today’s video-oriented message-makers are doing is not exactly something new. It is often mimicking techniques and devices that story-tellers have been using for centuries to make vivid and compelling the truths they were teaching. (And how much more so the Holy Spirit by inspiration!) By identifying these techniques in the text and honing your story-telling skills you too can bring these Bible events to life in the minds of your hearers!

Not every text speaks directly about Jesus. But there are many parts of the Bible that reveal aspects of our saving God and his plans for humanity. Many of them are very relevant to 21st century people. Here are two, for example, that we Lutheran preachers often neglect:

* Social justice (OT very concerned about the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, eg. Jer 22:3)
* Environmental concerns (We might couch these in terms of “care for creation.”)

**Conclusion**

I think we Lutheran preachers get our confidence shaken when we see how our 21st century audience’s attention is being stolen and monopolized by slick, screen-delivered messaging. We underestimate the gifts we have—the perfect message, the gospel!—and the skills we’ve honed. (Tell the story of Sam videotaping me.) The gospel we can’t improve on. But the skills we can. Set yourself a goal for improving your preaching. Maybe try one of these:

* Read engaging literature and analyze what makes it engaging.
* Enroll in a writing or public speaking class (share how Tom Franzmann did a Dale Carnegie course).
* Find a computer program (Grammarly?) that will help improve your writing.
* Regularly view a WELS pastor who you know to be a solid preacher.

You’ve got what it takes to communicate to 21st century people. You’re an oral communicator, just like every person that appears on TV or Youtube. You understand that your purpose is not just about information delivery. You have the message that has transformed more people than any other message in history. You’ve been equipped to uncover some of the greatest treasures that have ever been written in human literature. You know how to exegete and exposit the inspired Scriptures! And you have the privilege to spotlight an amazing God who entered the human race so that he could talk in human language and teach down to earth people face to face, who came to take on the human experience, who knows how tough it is to make people understand. But he also came to do what we couldn’t do, to keep the law for us who couldn’t do it and to die for the sins of people who were indifferent to his message. What a privilege! Preach him brothers!

Final announcements:

* Attend symposium on Christian apologetics Sept. 16-17!
* See documents online at [www.sew-wels.net/DistrictWorshipConference2019](http://www.sew-wels.net/DistrictWorshipConference2019)