

# *THE INCARNATIONAL PREACHER*

Proclaiming the Living Christ to Form a Living Faith



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.



**book of faith**  
Open Scripture. Join the Conversation.

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# INTRODUCTION

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The Book of Faith Initiative grew out of awareness and a concern that people in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America were growing increasingly biblically illiterate. The trend was a long-term one and it would not be likely to be an easy one to reverse. For a tradition where sola scriptura had been a rallying cry, it was a troubling reality.

A resolution brought before the North Carolina Synod at its 2005 assembly both called attention to this and also called for action to do something about it. As a result, the Book of Faith Initiative was originally put in place as a five-year emphasis lasting from 2007 to 2012. Biblical experts were called upon to provide resources and help support this effort. Congregations were challenged to put a Book of Faith Initiative in place within the life of the local church.

A big part of the Book of Faith Initiative was an emphasis on teaching a four-fold way of reading Scripture. These four ways were devotional, historical, literary and Lutheran theological reading. We will not spend time in this introduction unpacking what each of these ways of reading the Bible offers but each brings its own gifts to the reader. You can go to the Book of Faith web site and find more about these approaches and the helpful resources that have been developed to help people apply them as they read the Bible.

One of the assessments of the Book of Faith Initiative when the initial five year period was over was that as important as this effort had been, permeation into the life of the church and even more into the lives of people in the pews had been less than was needed. It was a good start, but it had not yet brought the church to a place where members of the ELCA were biblically literate. In fact, the effort had not yet reached the vast majority of regular attenders in the church. So when 2012 came, it was decided to make this a long-term effort and to keep going. This book on preaching is a part of that second wave of work that is currently in place.

One reason for this book is a present reality that we will discuss more in the first chapter. Most people who attend church don't read their Bible regularly. Despite programming and

resources to help people when they do read their Bible, these are of little use until we can get people into their Bibles!

If reading the Bible is still down the road for many, where is it that we can engage most people through the Bible? The most practical answer is in the sermon. Even if the average person who regularly attends an ELCA congregation isn't yet opening their Bible at home, if they come to worship, they are hearing a sermon. And in most cases, that sermon has clear biblical grounding and is based on a Bible text. In some cases, the pastor chooses the biblical text or it is part of a thematic series. But most often within the Lutheran tradition the Scripture that grounds the sermon is from a lesson or lessons within a lectionary – either the Revised Common Lectionary or the newer Narrative Lectionary.

This means that every week, people who almost never open their Bible still listen to readings from Scripture as part of attending worship. It means that these same people hear someone get up and use one or more of those Bible lessons as a doorway to begin a sermon. If the sermon doesn't do its work, Scripture remains something from the past with little connection to the life people live and little ability to show them a living God who has come to us in Jesus and is still at work in the world today.

However, if the sermon does its work, those same people will find Scripture as a place to start a conversation about God, a “source and norm” for the faith that gathers them each week. From that base they will encounter the God who has come among us in Christ. That encounter with Christ will help what starts in the past to become a present reality. And if it goes well, people will discover or rediscover that Jesus loves them and that their lives matter. They will feel useful to God and sent back to their lives to be a part of what God is up to in the world in which they live every day.

This resource is not under the illusion that it somehow even comes close to a complete “how to” for preachers. There is already much in place regarding theology, exegetical skills, etc. and this book is to be one supplement to the many excellent resources out there to help preachers get inside and underneath the biblical text. In addition, most pastors and deacons who preach regularly within our tradition are already well versed in the Bible and

have good skills to begin to share what the text is about when they preach.

Professors of Bible, theology and homiletics have done good work preparing people in many ways and we start with gratitude for their foundational work. This book is written to add to it in a small way, not replace it nor in any way be seen as a critique of the work that others have done. It would be presumptuous to lift up the chapters that follow as being able to be an exhaustive and all-inclusive look at preaching.

So if you are a preacher, use what follows here as a way of reflecting on your preaching and how to work to make it “stickier” so that what people get from the sermon has more connection to making the Bible come to life as a “book of faith.” The sermon is the primary bridge between the Bible and something that grounds people throughout the week. It is from this base that the quality resources being produced within the Book of Faith Initiative as well as many other excellent biblical resources that are available are most likely to be things that people want to look into as they hopefully begin to open their Bibles at home, in small groups and in other settings within their lives. As you read this book, if it peaks your imagination in ways that find their way into your preaching, then it will have contributed in a small way to biblical renewal within the church.

Church today certainly isn't what it used to be. Not that long ago, many of our members grew up attending congregations that were adding educational space and changing meeting rooms into classrooms to accommodate them as they attended Sunday School in droves. Church classrooms were full and so were sanctuaries. Businesses were closed on Sundays. If you wanted to leave the house and find an unlocked, open door, church was about the only option.

Today, those same children are decades older. Many are grandparents to grandchildren who don't attend Sunday School and who are being raised by parents who don't attend worship. Many mainline congregations are aging. Many are getting smaller. A number of different projections estimate that between 20 and 25 percent of all Protestant congregations in existence will close in the next fifteen years.

There is a lot of inertia moving us closer and closer to what seem to be predetermined outcomes. A recent trend analysis of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was used in an article written by Dwight Zscheile. He writes,

According to projections from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's (ELCA) Office of Research and Evaluation, the whole denomination will have fewer than 67,000 members in 2050, with fewer than 16,000 in worship on an average Sunday by 2041.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, such projections are not likely to be entirely accurate. They are simply using existing trends and calculating where they may lead, and there are a lot of possible scenarios and options between here and there. People will intervene sooner or give up sooner than the curve. The ELCA will either find ways to enhance its effectiveness and change the curve in the years ahead, or financial realities will make the system and institution non-sustainable long before it gets to only 16,000 people in worship. It could even merge with another tradition to create a sustainable bump in critical mass – and try again. The possibilities are vast.

But a very real option is that people will do nothing significant and the trends will continue, at least in some places. The path of revitalization requires significant energy, commitment and durability. There are low passion levels present in many of our people. They often lack clarity and convictions about why this matters and how it impacts their lives and community. Combine that with the simple realities of energy and aging among our members and it is likely that many places will simply not be able to muster up the strength to engage the kinds of transformation and efforts needed to change the curve. We already see many examples of this around us.

That ethos saps energy from everyone! It is depressing to people in the congregations experiencing decline, but it also saps energy from churchwide and synodical leaders working to reverse these trends and from neighboring churches that may be worried that they are next. A culture of anxiety, if not acknowledged and harnessed effectively, can work against us making the kinds of changes needed to revitalize the church.

Among people who do attend, decades of church loyalty are not paying off with deep spiritual roots. There is a sense that while many in today's world are "spiritual but not religious," there are also many within the church who are "religious but not spiritual." We will explore some of these thoughts in more detail later, but they lay a foundation that many people who preach regularly in the church today will recognize. The trends are not universal, exceptions exist, but they are observable everywhere. You do not need to look hard or far to find congregations in decline and Christians struggling to make sense of it all.

One contributing issue that plagues the church in today's world is diminishing biblical literacy. The result is that the majority of people who attend our churches have little or no meaningful contact with Scripture during the week. This is clearly laid out in the following paragraph from the Book of Faith web site:

For many of us, the encounter with Scripture is limited to the excerpts that are read on Sunday morning. Many of us – and many of our neighbors – are biblically illiterate, unsure of how to engage Scripture. Many of us are unaware of the rich Lutheran insights that have been helpful in understanding the many ways that God

engages us through the Bible. The challenge of Book of Faith is to address these realities directly and to experience more fully the power of the Word.<sup>2</sup>

This illiteracy means that people don't know the biblical material well, they don't have access to it within their daily contexts, and they don't have the ability to use it to make sense of the world in which they live and function.

As a result, although the above paragraph talks about the "many ways that God engages us through the Bible," most people do not find themselves in a place where God is engaging them in *any* of those ways! This leaves a huge vacuum in the spiritual lives of our people. How sad to think that many of our people have lost the ability to spend time with God in one of the places where we are most clear that God is available and speaking to us.

Another issue relates to the role of television, radio, live streaming and social media in the world of our members. People in 1950 got the majority of their religious instruction from their local congregation. There were far fewer radio stations, television wasn't in most homes yet and the ability to live stream religious content was not even in the imaginations of the most visionary people. That meant that people received a somewhat consistent pattern of teaching and preaching. What they received one week was reinforced when they returned next week. What was taught in Sunday School to children was mirrored in family discussions and summer Vacation Bible School and reinforced in Bible camps. In addition, a high percentage of people attending congregations in 1950 were doing so almost every Sunday as part of a lifelong pattern and community norm that they grew up with.

Contrast that historic reality with the family today that thinks Christian radio and music is a good thing (after all, it's Christian). During the fifteen-minute drive to and from church they are playing contemporary Christian music. Don't get distracted here – this is NOT a complaint about contemporary music as if traditional music is the right way to be faithful. No, it is saying that the lyrics in the songs people hear and sing along with on the radio may seem "Christian" and receive de facto and tacit approval as a result. The lyrics can be catchy and repetitive, and the tune may help embed them in the minds and hearts of the hearers.



The lyrics may carry theology that is more likely to be preached in a very different theological environment than the one fostered in the Lutheran congregation that they attend. It could easily be competing with and even undoing the very theological teaching and proclamation that we are providing. In the thirty minutes that the family commutes to church, they may be deepening their understandings of things we find to be wrong, contradictory or even harmful (with respect to our Lutheran theological perspectives and teachings). Our fifteen-minute sermon is unlikely to reframe or undo everything that we find worrisome or problematic. And the radio station may be on in the car Monday through Saturday doing the same work and imprinting the same messages day after day.

Add to that TV and radio preachers and teachers, online streaming of a wide variety of content, religious podcasts and social media posts from all sorts of perspectives and you can begin to see the issues. After all, Joel Osteen has a very impressive show and a pretty slick delivery. He sounds pretty smart and very spiritual. And watching a single hour of this gives more contact time with his teaching than a month of sermons in our congregations (assuming people are actually present four weeks in a row).

This means that people not only need to receive good teaching, they also need to receive the essential tools to understand a Lutheran hermeneutic that helps them to make sense of what we share and the tools to sort through all the other material that they will encounter in the world around them. Give them good teaching, dynamic preaching and meaningful tools to help them do their own thinking and sorting and you will offer people a number of gifts they can use throughout life. But if we simply operate and preach in a “business as usual” kind of way, then people will be left to fend for themselves. This is the situation we find ourselves in right now. People are often confused and dejected and find Scripture to be either unclear or irrelevant – or both.

A related issue is that as members of our congregations see and hear preaching from other sectors of Christianity, the claims that other traditions make for the Bible don't always square with our understanding of the Bible. People with more conservative or fundamentalist understandings believe that words like “inerrant” apply to Scripture and they use self-descriptors like “Bible believing.” Immediately our defenses go up when we

hear things like this. We know we aren't "Bible believing" sorts of people; while a Google search of "Bible Believing churches" yields a lot of results, none of them appear to be Lutheran! But if we are not that, then what are we?

These ideas don't align with ours and since we have done little to give our people equally strong and clear vocabulary and messages to work from, they often have no effective way to respond. This means that people are often unclear about the role that Scripture takes in our preaching and teaching, and how it applies to their daily lives. The result is a denomination filled with people who think Scripture doesn't influence who they are, what they say or what they do.

The impact of this can be seen in congregational responses using the Reveal survey. Results from surveys taken in ELCA congregations show that people consistently report little agreement with the statement, "the Bible has decisive authority over what I say and do." In fact, it is not uncommon for less than ten percent of respondents in an ELCA congregation to believe that the Bible has an authoritative role in shaping their lives.

Part of this may not be entirely accurate. Because our people believe they are not attending a "Bible believing" church, words like authority sound like something someone else would say. It isn't our language. If letting the Bible have "authority" over our lives means requiring unwavering belief in six literal twenty-four-hour days for the creation story, then a large number of us simply want out. Many Lutherans, including clergy, would look at a sentence like, "The Bible has decisive authority over what I say and do," be resistant to it and even try to justify the resistance. We don't like the language of authority and seem to resist applying it to Scripture.

But for a moment, let's look at the inverse situation. Suppose a sentence stated, "Lutherans teach that Scripture should not have authority over what our members say and do." Many of us reading this would say, "Of course we don't teach that! The Bible is important to us." So, while we may have a problem with authority language, we also know Scripture has a role in our life and it shapes our shared life together. But we haven't found too many effective ways to say what we want to say to make that clear.

The Book of Faith web site gives a little history to the Book of Faith Initiative that may be helpful here.

The 2005 North Carolina Synod Assembly endorsed a memorial from the Philadelphia Evangelical Lutheran Church in Dallas, NC, asking that the ELCA encourage the development of an “ongoing effort to address issues surrounding the authority of Scripture.”<sup>3</sup>

Note that the church took up this initiative in response to the issues relating to “the authority of Scripture.”

Frankly, because conservative evangelical and fundamentalist preachers spend much of their time preaching about the authority of Scripture and its inerrant nature, many people in those traditions are crystal clear in what they think about Scripture. Those of us in more nuanced traditions may not agree with their stance, but the stance is clear, and their members understand it and take it to heart.

We have little to offer in return, not because our tradition lacks something to say, but because we take it far too much for granted. Our preachers do usually use a Lutheran hermeneutic to draw conclusions and make statements about Scripture, but we often do so without sharing our methodology as clearly as fundamentalists share theirs, and the result is that the majority of our members have difficulty seeing things as grounded in Scripture – even when they are.

This seems odd to most Lutheran preachers. We tend to preach using a text, often from a lectionary, and we think that the connection is obvious to the hearers. But our methods are grounded in multiple ways to gain insights and are usually nuanced. We have a “connect the dots” problem: what we say is scripturally grounded, but our people aren’t sure it is or at least how it is grounded or connected.

Trends in the church today also show decreasing contact time with many of the members of our congregations. It was only fifty years ago that over half of our members were in church often and attendance patterns averaged over fifty percent of membership in a

typical week. Most of our members heard preaching often, were routinely exposed to biblical stories and images in the wider culture and had a basic awareness of Scripture and its message.

Of course, much of this was shaped by civil religion. Being a Christian was part of the American definition of respectability. Many in society would be a part of the church to verify their being OK and that they belonged to a like-minded, conventional group, but they did not come to be transformed by encountering God in worship. This cultural reality shaped the norms for both society and the church. Preaching in many settings served the wider societal agenda as much as it deepened the faith and faithfulness of the hearers.

Today's church attendance patterns indicate approximately a quarter of our members are in church on any given Sunday. "Regular" attendance, once close to weekly, can now mean whatever the person claiming to be a regular, active attender means and can easily be more like once a month than once a week for many. This means that teaching comes in brief spurts with long gaps in between contacts. Even a sermon series that offers good teaching and clear and helpful communication may only get one fourth of the message through to a once a month attendee.

One consequence of this has been a loss in the anticipation of transformation for the people who continue to attend our churches. As a member of the church council in my first congregation said about reaching out to unchurched people in our community, "I don't know why we're so concerned about these people. If they were respectable, they would already be here." Clearly there was little expectation that there was much change needed from the respectable people who already attended!

In another incident, the organist once confronted a good friend of mine who is a pastor after worship and said, "Don't you ever preach a sermon that makes me uncomfortable like that again. I do not come here to be made uncomfortable." Again, we see the hope and even expectation that we will come to worship and leave the same or maybe feeling a little better about how OK we are. This is common enough to be a significant issue for preachers, even if the sentiment is not universal among our members.

This impacts how pastors do their work and view the people they work with. When my family moved to the Chicago area and I was to begin working for the churchwide organization, part of moving to a new community was finding a congregation to which we could belong. We visited eight congregations in our search before deciding on one where our family would join.

One place we visited was a small congregation. Like most ministries, there were some things to recommend it and some significant things that concerned us. It soon became obvious that we would not be joining this particular congregation when we asked the pastor about what was involved in joining the church. His answer was clearly one he had given before, without adapting it for us.

He said, "It's easy. We have a class after church over lunch. Then the next week you just get up in front of the congregation and we welcome you as a member. We do it during the Apostles Creed, but don't worry. You don't need to know it. You can bring your book up with you."

This pastor knew that I was a pastor, but his autopilot response simply spit out the same spiel that he gave everyone. The bottom line: This is no big deal. It will not change your life.

This ethos is all too present. When you take biblical illiteracy, reduced attendance patterns and contact time, status quo as the goal and church membership as something convenient that won't change your life, you see the mess we are now in. The church has lacked a message of meaningful transformation, and that has contributed at least something to church decline. Changes in society have played a big role in this as well. But societal changes aside, church malaise may be more connected to our message and how we share it than we care to admit. It is easier or feels better to point a finger and blame the world for all of it.

No matter where we put the blame, one thing is clear – the world is not going to fix this for the church. The church is going to have to do most of the work of changing if the future is going to be different.

As you read on, we will explore how approaching the task of teaching and especially preaching from Scripture is a core practice for renewing the church. Article VII in the Augsburg Confession reminds us that the church is the “assembly of believers.” It is people of faith first and foremost. If we try to “fix” the church without revisiting how we grow and nurture its people as followers of Jesus, it will likely lead to disappointment. But where this is done well and with renewed attention given to the work of preaching the gospel and helping people grow in faith and as disciples of Jesus, the church can be revitalized in amazing ways.

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

1. What is the general trend of worship attendance in your congregation over the last twenty years? If you are part of an ELCA congregation and your pastor(s) have completed and submitted their annual reports, you can access your trend report online and get actual data.
2. What is the age range of the adults who worship at your congregation on a typical Sunday?
  - a. You can use age brackets of 18-30, 31-50, 50-65, 65+ to roughly map out the age of adult participants as you scan through a directory.
  - b. How many youth (grades 7-12) attend worship in a typical week at your congregation?
  - c. How many children (grade 6 and younger) attend worship in a typical week at your congregation?
3. Look at the lyrics of the hymns your congregation sang for the last month. Be sure to look at all the verses that you used. Which verses were strong and emphasized what you were focused on as the preacher? Were any verses less helpful or even counterproductive?
4. Make a list of all the people who you think worship regularly at your congregation. How many of the people on that list have regular Bible reading and devotional practices? How many do not? How many do you have no clear idea concerning their practices? How might you find out more about the people whose devotional habits are unknown to you?

This chapter will focus on why Sunday – or whatever day(s) we are gathering people in our congregation – matters. There are some very basic things that preachers can do to ensure that the time spent with people when we gather can be a base from which discipleship can grow. We will begin to show ways that we will change the practices we use to teach and preach from Scripture if what happens on Sundays is to bring about different results than what we are currently doing in most congregations.

Like it or not, we get one chance each week with most of the most active people we have contact with. In addition, many of the people we preach and teach to on a “regular” basis will not even attend every week, with some attending closer to one week each month. This means we have from one to four contact hours per month with the core of our active members. It is not a lot to work with, especially since a percentage of this time is already scripted with liturgical expectations that both limit and enhance opportunities for creativity but take up a certain amount of that weekly hour of time.

We can bemoan the fact that there are less people and that we have less influence on the people we work with and for. Yes, there is a big hill to climb ahead, but there are things that can be done to change both the situation for the long term and the vitality of the faith in people in the short term. Creative preachers who make good decisions and do good work are doing some very helpful, effective things in congregations around the church. We can all learn from them and we can also contribute to the work ahead by figuring out together how to navigate the new world in which we live and by not becoming too discouraged or even paralyzed by the challenges of it all.

To do this, rising to the challenge of the Book of Faith Initiative to make Scripture more authoritative in the lives of our members will be essential. There is ample evidence from every corner of the church that renewed interest and commitment to Scripture accompanies the renewal of the church. This is already in the Lutheran DNA as *sola scriptura* rang out as a rallying cry during the Reformation. Multiple research tools also support it as a universally helpful starting point for congregational revitalization in today’s world.



One of these many assessments is *Reveal*, a tool originally developed for Willow Creek Community Church to assess the impact of Willow Creek's ministry on the spiritual development of participants there. The assessment showed that people were not growing in faith anywhere near levels that leaders had expected. As Cally Parkinson led a team in exploring what to do about this disappointing reality, they identified patterns that eventually proved to be present in churches across a wide variety of sizes and denominations, including ELCA congregations.

As her group did early research on the connections between practices and renewal, they discovered that spending time in Bible reflection was the most predictive of renewal and growth. In response to that finding she writes that one key to renewing congregations, no matter what issues these congregations face as they begin is, "Embed the Bible in everything: Make Scripture the heart of the church culture. Take away people's excuses by doing whatever you can to make Bible engagement easy."<sup>4</sup> Parkinson says, "If leaders aren't sure what to do, renewing commitment to the Bible is a universally good place to start – a sort of no risk first move."<sup>5</sup>

Of course, if this is the case, then Sunday can't be the only time when people engage Scripture. But at the same time, Sunday may be the only time we have to engage some people. The challenge and opportunity are discovering what can we do when we are *together* to enhance what people do when we are *apart*.

There was a time when I worked on the staff of the Nebraska Synod as an Assistant to the Bishop. I noted a trend in the skills of the congregational leaders as I visited them during various consultations. I would often use a text from 1 Corinthians 12 about the church as the body of Christ and ask people to open a Bible and find the text with me. Remember, these meetings were usually with renewal teams, call committees or congregation councils. These people were all congregational leaders and involved in the life of the church at a higher than average level. One would tend to expect above average performance from this group in comparison to the abilities of the average member.

Inevitably, a significant percentage would simply open the Bible at Genesis and start leafing through it until they found 1 Corinthians. They had no idea that 1 Corinthians was in the New Testament. It wasn't unusual for more than one person to stop at 1 Chronicles 13 since it had a "1" in front and the word started with a "C." Even if most eventually found it on their own, it was often a five-minute project to get them all there without just telling them what page number to go to. I began to wonder how it could be that congregational leaders could come to church week after week for years and not know how to find 1 Corinthians? It wasn't like we were asking them to find a minor prophet whose book was only two pages long!

The sad truth is that the majority of people who regularly attend worship appear to rarely open a Bible when they are not in church. And equally frightening is the reality that with Scripture inserts, projection screens and other printed materials used in our congregations, most people don't open one on Sunday either. It is possible to come to worship 52 weeks of the year, give generously to support the congregation, take on a position of leadership in the church and never touch a Bible once in that period of time – not even a digital version of the Bible on their laptop, phone or e-reader! This seems to be the norm in many congregations.

This may ruffle the feathers of many who are committed to doing things the way we have done them or for others who have a financial stake in providing printed materials for worship. But congregations that want to cultivate scriptural familiarity and help people immerse themselves in the Bible would do well to stop using printed bulletin materials that make it easy for people to simply come to worship and passively follow along with the reading on a piece of paper.

In most settings, including pre-printed lessons is actually working against us and contributing to the problem of biblical illiteracy. Doing so means that people have little feel for where a passage comes from, perhaps not even being sure if the reading is from the Old or New Testament. It is a sure bet that if people are passive when they engage Scripture during worship and when participating in most church activities, they will certainly be passive about it when they leave and head home. They have no tools, cues or prompts to even hint that it could or should be different.

In order for Sunday to matter and the proclamation of the gospel to find its way into the fiber of peoples' lives, we will have to be open to changing a lot of things that make Sunday convenient but also minimize engagement and capacity building. One way to improve biblical literacy and contact in worship is to eliminate printed Scripture texts and encourage people to bring their own Bible to worship or use a Bible that is provided in the pew racks. The preacher and readers should refer to the texts clearly and encourage people to open a Bible, locate the lesson and follow along as one of the disciplines of worship. If Sunday doesn't help people become comfortable with the Bible when they are together and getting encouragement and help, then Monday through Saturday will be a challenge for people to navigate Scripture on their own. But if people can develop familiarity with the Bible while in worship then there is a chance that they may feel capable enough to explore more deeply during the week.

When I teach leaders about equipping their congregational participants during worship, they often voice a sense of despair at the notion. They often say, "What about all the people who only come once a month? Whatever we do isn't going to reach most of our people anyway." All too often this idea tempts people to simply give up. Why bother doing something that won't reach most people anyway?

Making Sunday matter is being sure that there are equipping aspects to worship *every week*. It may be necessary to find ways to be redundant about this. Some people are sure to not be there when you do something. Making the assumption that you have already asked people to pick up and open a Bible – and that should be sufficient – might be a false assumption as a high percentage of the people who attend worship in your congregation may not have been there when you encouraged it, or if they were, may need a reminder or prompt. Redundancy and reminders also help reduce the guesswork and anxiety that visitors often experience. But giving up and not doing anything to deal with it is simply not a faithful option. Finding ways to teach using creative redundancy is essential.

Let's suppose you are trying to use Sunday as a springboard to helping people have a more regular devotional life. Your goal is not for them just to hear about the benefits of having a disciplined devotional life during a sermon. The real desired outcome is for them

to engage in the practice of actually having one during the week. It may be necessary to set apart a specific moment in the service that is part of the preaching and teaching that day but not inside the sermon time. Perhaps it is set up as a month-long emphasis. As the preacher, your task is to figure out how to make it happen in a way that builds emphasis, has a chance of being heard one or more times by a high percentage of the people and seems meaningful and fresh. What could such an effort look like?

While there are likely to be multiple ways of doing this, one way that works very well is the practice of using some sort of testimony or interview to advance the emphasis. A leader who knows his or her people well will know people within the congregation who already have a strong personal devotional life and for whom it is important. The preacher can and should include this in sermons. He or she can share a bit about the importance of study and devotional reading of Scripture during the week but moving from preached content to active practice in the lives of hearers generally requires more than that.

Perhaps a brief three-minute piece is inserted before the reading of Scripture each week for a month. Not officially part of the “sermon,” it still is an important part of the preaching and teaching for the congregation. The worship leader says something like, “As we prepare to hear Scripture this morning, let’s be reminded how important and meaningful it can be to live in Scripture throughout the week as well.” A member is invited to come forward and he or she briefly shares what their devotional practice is and then focuses attention on the life it brings them. At the end, a prayer is offered giving thanks for the witness of the person as well as making an intercession for others whose devotional life could be strengthened. The cycle is repeated each week for a month with different people sharing each time.

Anyone who comes every week will not be bored – the redundancy intentionally shares multiple stories and diverse voices from a variety of people. It is not the same thing repeated for a month and therefore can be redundant in focus while also being fresh each week. In addition, the practice helps people meet others at a new level and hear and see a different side of people whom they may have known for decades but have never heard them talk about their faith or spiritual disciplines. Anyone who comes once or twice in a

month is still engaged at least once or twice. Much better than rolling the dice, treating Sundays like they matter and using what people give you as a starting point will be essential if we are to preach the Book of Faith in ways that change behaviors and lead to deeper discipleship.

Just encouraging devotional reading or studying Scripture (even with testimonials from people who are doing this) is not enough though. There needs to be a more clearly offered equipping aspect as well. In the beginning, it is not enough to just encourage something, leaders also have to facilitate it happening. It may be important to synchronize such teaching and testimonials with lifting up and providing some devotional or study resources as well as a campaign that helps people get started. “Preaching” that makes and encourages disciples will expand to include multiple times and ways of communicating within the hour that we have with people. It will also be linked to conscious connections to resources and assistance that will help move people to try this in their own lives throughout the week.

Another helpful piece for Sundays is integrating the preaching with the relational life of the church. Articulating a clear theme sentence and then applying it to people’s lives can result in a question for people to engage and respond to. For example, if the text is Mark 1 and the focus is on John the Baptist preparing the way and pointing others to Jesus, a good theme sentence for the sermon might be, “God uses people to point others to Jesus as Lord and Savior.”

The preacher can then construct a question that asks and/or applies that question within the lives of the hearers. For example, a question based on the same sermon might then ask, “How has God used you recently to point others to Jesus as Lord and Savior?” The question could be projected on a screen if the congregation uses projection, printed in the bulletin next to the line where the sermon is listed, or placed in other materials produced for worship.

One very effective way to embed the sermon and help people share thoughts about it is to put the question up over the refreshments table for discussion during fellowship. Perhaps

with a label, “Food for Thought,” the question can be one of the things people are asked to discuss together as they enjoy coffee and donuts. Once in a while, the preacher can even do a shout-out over the fellowship and say, “I know you are all talking about very important things, but just to humor me, could you take five minutes and discuss the ‘Food for Thought’ question.” If you don’t force this to happen every week but are intentional about interrupting every few weeks, people will discuss the question and share stories and ideas with each other. This is an essential part of using Sundays well. If people don’t start thinking about what the message means and how it connects to their lives soon after the message is offered, they are unlikely to do it or even remember enough of it to do it later.

All of this is to say that good preaching is not just about the time in the pulpit. It is also very conscious of how the rest of Sunday worship and fellowship time support and advance the work. Creating a supportive environment with lots of intentional places to learn, reflect, share and support one another is essential to preaching that has any chance of making a lasting impact and helping shape the lives of people as disciples of Jesus. This means making people work a bit more to ensure they are engaged, teaching at multiple points in the service and not just during the formal sermon, and helping people reflect, remember and apply what they have heard while they are still together. Create such a space and culture and your preaching and its influence will grow.

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

1. How is Scripture presented in your current worship practices? Do you print it in the bulletin or use printed inserts with the lessons? Do you project it on a screen? Do you have Bibles in the pews and encourage people to use them? Do most people bring their own Bibles from home and use them?
2. At your next congregation council meeting use a reading from 1 Corinthians 12 and pass out Bibles to your council members. Do not give page numbers, only the text. Watch and see how quickly people access the text and how much they struggle to find it. Do not shame them if they struggle. Just make a mental note and use the information for your own work ahead.
3. Make a list of all the people who you think worship regularly at your congregation. Over the next four weeks, put an “x” next to each one for each time they worship. At the end of the month, what percentage of your worshippers worshipped 4 times? 3 times? 2 times? 1 time? Missed all four weeks? How might knowing this impact the ways you preach, re-emphasize ideas, etc.?
4. If you listed someone as worshipping somewhat regularly but they missed all four weeks of your tracking, which of the people who have not been there for a month or longer should you reach out to as a matter of pastoral concern and how will you do that?

The “preach the gospel” task is one that is grounded in Scripture. Whether you are a hardcore fundamentalist with an inerrant view of the King James Version or more liberal with metaphorical understandings of the Bible, there is general agreement that the Christian Scriptures are at the heart of the Christian witness. Without them there would be no core from which to work and there would be little agreement on what even constituted the church, its purpose and witness.

In our tradition, Scripture is viewed as the “source and norm” of our faith. It is a starting point and not a destination. We don’t “preach the Bible,” we preach the gospel biblically. It is the gospel – the good news of God’s saving acts in Christ that shapes the agenda for the sermon.

We begin in Scripture, thankful for and indebted to the early church’s witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as well as for the Hebrew Scriptures that share the journey of the Jewish people up to that point. As Christians, the story of Jesus stands at the center of our understanding of God’s involvement in human history. While there may be various understandings of how wide the perimeter of the circle then goes, all who call themselves “Christian” have Jesus at the center of their story.

Because the Christian story in the West has been influenced to some extent by political forces since the time of Constantine, it is helpful to learn some things from our Jewish sisters and brothers if we are to preach well. Many of their insights about Scripture come from a less culturally captive viewpoint and therefore offer less culturally bound understandings.

One Jewish insight that is helpful is the understanding of how Scripture shapes the conversation today. The majority of Christians today have some sense that the Bible is an answer book, and that when we have a question, we go to the Bible to find a definitive answer. This is more prevalent the more conservative the hermeneutic, but it is a mindset that fills American pews in most traditions across the Christian spectrum.



Much of this originated when advances in science threatened many Christians, starting with Galileo and Copernicus and finding its apex in Darwin's theory of evolution. In each case, the church pushed back against or even censored or excommunicated the scientists responsible for the claim. In the United States the Scopes Monkey Trial in 1925 was a public time and place where this conflict arose and burrowed its way into the American psyche.

At stake in this worldview is a simple question: "Is the Bible always right or true?"

Of course, the hermeneutic that you use determines this answer more than anything else. If you are a literalist and also assume the answer is yes, then whenever the Bible disagrees with other data, the other data is judged to simply be wrong. There is no need to look further or check your assumptions.

Less literal hermeneutics don't have this same approach, but most Christians bear some sense or at least have some leaning into the idea that the Bible will always provide some sort of answer. While mainline Christians may be less threatened by biblical criticism and scientific insights, it is not hard to find people in our pews who think of the Bible as the "Answer Book" or a prescriptive "manual for living." It is our job to mine the text to find its message and then the preacher's job is to share that message in an illuminating, fresh and helpful way. Under this understanding of Scripture and preaching, the liberal and the fundamentalist both start with the assumption that the text is supposed to answer something for us, and good preaching will release that truth for the congregation as the bottom line.

Contrast that with a central Jewish understanding that uses a different mindset for the work. Jewish people believe that it is our responsibility to have the conversations today, but that we don't start in a vacuum; we *start* with Scripture because that gives God the *first* word. Letting God go first sets the stage and tone for the conversation and is foundational, but there is no assumption that God has stopped the conversation just because Scripture is finished. The Bible forms the base for the conversation and the task of hermeneutics is not just to mine what is already there in a fresh way. The preacher and the community are to continue to wrestle from that point with "what does this mean for us today?"

This can also contribute to our faith tradition in significant and new ways. Jews have gathered these interpretations and explorations of God's word for centuries in collections of insights known as Midrash. Fresh insights continued to add to the body of knowledge that has its foundation in Scripture but is not limited to it. While the term "Midrash" has a wide variety of understandings, they all reflect an appreciation that new and fresh contextual insights contribute to our body of knowledge and understanding about Scripture, faith and life.

In some ways, Jews understand every sermon to be "local midrash." It is the preacher's job to use Scripture as a starting point and then to connect that foundation with the life of the congregation and the world in which it exists and functions. As a result of being unfettered by Christian baggage, a typical rabbi's preaching is quite different than that of most Christian pastors.

Every pastor would do well to add this mindset to his or her preaching. The goal is not to just find out what the text meant or even answer what the text means now; the real desired outcome for the preacher is to help the congregation discern what God is saying to the congregation today.

Taking this concept into Christian preaching, this is not limited to what God wants the people to know, but the articulation of a clear and pointed call to all who hear and listen to the word, encounter Christ present and respond to Christ's call to participate as the body of Christ in the work of Christ. What comes forth in the sermon may not just be an explanation of the text but a fresh word from God for today – consistent with what God has been saying from the beginning but also a living word for today. And that word may not be completed in the sermon but finally in the conversations and applications that follow. The goal of preaching in such a mindset is to contribute to an ongoing conversation as a beginning of something that will likely continue long after the preacher has left the pulpit.

This means that effective preaching emerges from a matrix that includes a Scriptural foundation, good exegetical work, sound theological principles and commitments, contextual

insights and the life experiences of the congregation (including the preacher). All of these are vehicles for proclaiming the gospel of a God who is alive and at work as much now as in biblical times. It also assumes that the ongoing voice of the Holy Spirit will speak and continue to speak a living word in the life of the church today. The final result includes both insight and discernment for a life of faith.

Recently, Jeffrey Poor wrote about it in this way:

The Bible reminds us of those who came before us. It reminds us of God's faithfulness to them. And then it reveals our part in the grander story that is still unfolding all around us. And if we let it, it will take us on a journey. A journey to a deeper faith and a role in the story God is telling.

That's the beauty of the Bible. It's not just a book to read to gain knowledge, like every other book. It's a living book that can actually change you and guide you... If you let it.

Do not hear the above emphases on the role of the Bible as a dismissal of the discipline of studying history, learning insights from Greek and Hebrew languages or gaining insights from good commentaries. All of these are not only useful but extremely valuable tools in understanding the message of the text. However, the purpose of mining the text in a missional way is always to move beyond what these tools reveal and to progress to the message and calling that Christ is offering today. These efforts all provide an important and solid base from which to proceed, but without the intentionality and the permission to move the conversation forward into today's world, many sermons simply stop and go no further than the explanation of things to us – an experience that's both boring and disappointing for most hearers.

The average churchgoer does not come to worship to hear a list of what God has done. They don't mind hearing some of that and we all know that it is an essential and faithful part of the work. So remember that the point being made here is not one telling you to stop telling the story from which we have come and in which we first met Jesus and only speak of things present and things to come. People don't want to think of you as a preacher who concocts this each Sunday on your own like a new fad or flavor of the month. They want connection

to the Bible, to the church fathers and mothers, and a sense that what they are entering into is the ongoing story of the God who made the world and who has promised in Christ to accompany us all the way to the fulfillment of the reign of God. But as important as that is, it is only part of the work. It cannot stand alone and bring life.

But the next step in missional preaching requires the preacher to wrestle with this question every week: “In light of what God was up to in the text then, what is God saying to us now and, as a result, what is God seeking to call forth from us as the body of Christ?” As Jeffrey Poor urged us in the quote above, biblical preaching takes us on a “journey to a deeper faith and a role in the story God is telling.”

A sermon that does not at least attempt to place this before the hearers has fallen short of the bar needed to advance the development of people as disciples. Preaching is to help people see their lives as not just informed by the biblical narrative but actually continuing the narrative in their own way today as they serve as the feet, hands and voice of Jesus. This is not a legalistic, “God wants you to do X,” but is a calling to the preacher to dare to try to help people hear God’s calling in their vocations and in the shared life of the church. In this way they are called and encouraged to be witnesses to and participants in the inbreaking of the reign of God in their time.

Part of this will involve mining the text for how the gospel of God’s saving acts relates to the pericope upon which we are grounding our sermon. What issue(s) are the world and its people facing and what troubles and problems confront the people in the text? What is God’s saving action that brings grace as a way of moving forward for them? This basic premise, outlined so well by Paul Scott Wilson in his *Four Pages of the Sermon*,<sup>7</sup> helps us move from exegetical insight to clearer proclamation of the gospel.

At the same time, preaching that is relevant and seems to speak an authoritative voice into the hearer’s existence must move through the text and bring the conversation into the present. This means the preacher uses the text as a doorway through which God speaks to people in the present. The sermon is not just about God’s work in Scripture and the past but is also a vehicle through which God speaks a living word to people living and wrestling

with life today. So, God uses the preacher to ask, “What issues and struggles are the world and its people facing now that this text can address?” as well as, “How is God acting in the world today to bring healing, life and hope to people?”

We will explore some specific tactics and language for this in a later chapter in this book. Preaching that helps grow disciples will be an encounter with the crucified and risen Christ brought about by engagement with Scripture with the express purpose of articulating God’s life-giving call to participation in the lives of the hearers today. For the church to be missional and for people to function as disciples, people must sense and embrace that God’s saving work is inviting them to join in with what God is doing now and move beyond just being informed about what God has already done.

That means that effective preaching will also show people how God uses people of diverse gifts, skills and interests to advance God’s work. It will lift up connections to the baptismal vocations that people have been given in the waters of baptism and how God is working in and through the people of God today. It will call them to participate. It will invite them to imagine. It will raise questions that the people hearing the sermon cannot help but reflect upon.

Remember that all of this emphasis on calling forth participation and action needs to be put back in the context of the previous chapter. Christian preaching is always a declaration of the work of God to redeem and heal the world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is always grounded and focused primarily on the activity of God. It is only into this activity that we can be invited through the sermon. Anything else is not grounded in the mission of God or the gospel of Jesus Christ.

To urge human action without lifting up God’s presence and action is either works righteousness or a veiled form of secular humanism clothed in religion. As we preach, each of us is being used to raise the call and share the invitation for people to join in Christ’s work, not to just go forth and make the world a better place. Anything less may bring with it the illusion of being missional and relevant, but it ceases to be “preaching” since God is always the primary actor in the Christian story and its telling.

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

1. Think about your last few sermons. How has the sermon started or not started further conversations among the people? How many meaningful conversations (beyond the “nice sermon” comments to something with more content) did parishioners initiate with you as a result of these sermons?
2. If you are like most ELCA or other mainline preachers, you probably have some biblical hermeneutic that does not assume a literal or fundamentalist understanding of the Bible. If a lay member of your parish asks you about your ways of interpreting, what are four or five clear, concise and helpful statements you could share with them to help them see how you honor the Bible in the biblical tradition(s) you claim as you do your work?
3. When Jeffrey Poor’s quote was shared in this chapter it lifted up encounters with the Bible as ways that God offers real time guidance to us today. How do you understand the Bible as giving guidance and where does this find its way into your teaching and preaching?
4. If preaching the biblical story is a way of laying the groundwork for us to be invited into continuing that story, then how do you help people see their role in this? How does your preaching offer clear encouragement and invitation to them as they listen and then head back to the world in which they live?
5. Look at the sermon you preached last week – either by reading through the manuscript or listening to the recording. As you listen, pay attention to your message and what the preached message offered. How did you show people the intersection between an active God and their life? How did you articulate a conscious and clear invitation to them to more alert and intentional participation in advancing what God is up to?

Central to the Reformation was the place of the preached Word within the life of the church. Martin Luther believed that the worship life of the church had become corrupt and was in desperate need of reform. There were many examples of this, too numerous to recount here. But one of the central issues for Luther was the poor quality of preaching or its complete absence in many cases.

The Latin Vulgate was the version used by the church, so the Bible was read in a language that was unknown to the hearers and often, no one added any explanation or comment about the lessons. This was unthinkable to Luther! In addition, where good preaching and teaching was not present, superstitions and confusion had found their way into the common understanding of the people. Because a vacuum is naturally filled by something, where the church was not offering faithful teaching and preaching, bad content found its way in instead. Luther viewed this bad content as a dangerous mix of misleading and superstitious beliefs.

As a result, Lutherans have a significant commitment to preaching as central to what the church is about. This commitment comes from a strong emphasis on the centrality and renewal of preaching in the Reformation that was at the heart of Luther's convictions and reforms. He was unable to fathom a church where so many people entrusted both their temporal and eternal well-being to something that was unclear and even removed from their daily lives and situations.

In response to this Luther wrote, "the Christian congregation should never gather together without the preaching of God's Word..."<sup>8</sup> For Luther, the preached word is one of the ways that God makes Christ real and present to the gathered community. Preaching the Word made this come to life. Even the sacrament of Holy Communion was to be experienced as an extension of this reality.

Luther inherited a church where ritual was a major emphasis. It seemed to him that priests were primarily there to put on a show and did so in ways that made the meaning



or rituals and traditions obscure to common people. He saw a combination of power, which the church had lots of, and obscurity, which the church used to keep ordinary people off balance and at the mercy of the church and its leaders.

In contrast to the church Luther saw, he had deep-seated beliefs that the church should use whatever power it had for the good of God's people. He also believed that Jesus came to make God known to us – the exact opposite of what the church's commitment to keeping things obscure seemed to accomplish.

Today, in keeping to Luther's central emphasis that the Word of God makes God known and brings the gracious power to save and transform, the Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America affirms the Word of God as central to the church. It describes a complex and vibrant understanding of the phrase "Word of God." Chapter 2 of the constitution states:

This church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.

- a. Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation.
- b. The proclamation of God's message to us as both law and gospel is the Word of God, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed, beginning with the Word in creation, continuing in the history of Israel, and centering in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
- c. The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God's revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.

This defines three key ways that Lutherans understand Word: the person of Jesus Christ, law and gospel (judgment and mercy), and Scripture. As we move ahead, we'll look at these in more detail.



Martin Luther believed that the fullest expression of the Word of God had been incarnate in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. It was and is a living Word. More than information, the Word is a person and reveals a relationship and a commitment that lies at the heart of the gospel and that is the very center of the Christian faith.

With this commitment to Jesus Christ as central, a few years before he died, Martin Luther commissioned Lucas Cranach the Elder to paint an altar that still stands in Saint Mary's Church in Wittenberg, Germany. The altar was completed and initially dedicated in 1547 – shortly after Martin Luther died. It is a witness to some key themes that Luther felt should stand at the center of the church's practice.

I have used this altar to teach about Luther's understanding of Word and sacraments in many settings. It was commissioned later in his life and helps us understand Luther's more seasoned reflections on these issues. It is also not just a picture of what Luther sees in place and established, but it offers a vision of a church that Luther would not see come to fruition before his death. In fact, much of what this altar illuminates as a vision has still not come to fruition five centuries later!

The focus of our attention here will be limited to the bottom panel of Cranach's painting that deals directly with the work of preaching.

In the painting, Luther stands on the right side where he is preaching to a congregation. He is in a pulpit and with him is an open Bible. It is clear that preaching is connected to and grounded in Scripture. But he is not reading Scripture to the people. It is there to emphasize that it is foundational and must be present.

On the left side of the panel you see the congregation listening to the sermon. There are many faces here, all contemporaries of Luther from the local community of Wittenberg where this altar painting still sits nearly five hundred years later. Because there are several people in the congregation and the size of the group is much bigger than the image of Luther, the eye naturally drifts more to the congregation than to Luther. This is intentional. The preached word should be directed to the congregation and the focus should not be on the preacher.

But the ultimate focus of the painting is neither on the preacher nor on the audience. The focus is plainly and boldly on the center of the painting where we see Christ hanging on a cross. Luther and the congregants are very much a part of the picture, but the focus is not on the speaker or the hearers. It is on Jesus.

While Luther wrote about preaching often, he was probably never clearer than in what he directed to have painted on this altar in Wittenberg. The preacher was not to tell people about Jesus or to inform the audience about the gospel. The purpose of preaching was to show the congregation the presence of the crucified and risen Christ in their midst.

This challenge can seem daunting to any preacher. It is much easier to tell people about Jesus than it is to help them encounter him. But it is important as we look at preaching the Book of Faith that we remember that we do not preach the Bible. We preach the gospel biblically. The Bible is the source and norm for the work of preaching, but it is not the point. God's saving work in Christ is the point and the Bible is where we begin. For this to be real, Jesus Christ must be real as well.

In a fine blog post about this same altar panel, Martin Junge who serves as the General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation offers a good summary of how Luther viewed preaching, at least as this altar panel helps us understand it.

In summary, this is how Luther understood preaching – that it should be grounded in Scripture, pointing toward Christ and facing the people. To preach is to put the people in touch with the message of salvation in Jesus Christ as testified in Scripture. And thus, the message will be one of life, of freedom and of hope, focusing on the good news of justification by grace through faith alone: we receive new life to serve God and our neighbor, not because of who we are and what we do, but because of who God is and what God does through Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Grounded in the Word of God, Luther believed that the Word was not limited to words on a page, but first and foremost grounded in the Trinity and specifically received in the coming of a person, namely Jesus Christ, the son of God. This was essential to him. Preaching the Word of God was not primarily about teaching what the Bible says but

about helping people meet the crucified and risen Jesus Christ who is present among them and for them.

Another distinctive emphasis in the Lutheran understanding of preaching the Word is grounded in the two ways that God's Word comes to us – law and gospel. God's Word is simultaneously both. The law calls us to accountability and always reveals our sin. Limited to just this aspect of God's Word, we are left to our own efforts and always fall short. Lutherans like to say, "the law always condemns." The fullness of preaching the Word must include this reality for Lutherans.

At the same time, God's Word is also gospel. It proclaims God's saving acts in Christ. If the law puts all responsibility on us, the gospel puts all the work on God. The law asks, "Did you get it right?" and with that the law always calls us into question. In turn, the gospel declares, "What was wrong, God makes right in Christ."

This is one place where preaching often struggles. Too much law and the sermon is not a sermon at all. It is simply a gripe session about what is wrong with the world and perhaps what is wrong with the congregation. We have all heard this kind of sermon – filled with judgment and little hope. In fact, even a sermon with both law and gospel can easily be out of balance and spend most of the preacher's time and energy in declaring and expounding the law (it's easy to find powerful examples of where humanity is in a mess) and then simply add on at the end "but Jesus Christ died on a cross for all of this and we are forgiven. Amen."

The reverse is equally true. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is famously known for the phrase "cheap grace." He wrote, "Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. Grace alone does everything, they say, and so everything can remain as before."<sup>10</sup> The whole notion that the gospel simply says God loves us and forgives us without addressing the reality of our sin and calling forth repentance and transformation was anathema to him. He had seen a church stand on the gospel as an excuse to ignore the law and tolerate evil. Too little law and the gospel is somehow neutered since it speaks a word of saving grace into a reality that is not recognized accurately and honestly enough to need saving.

Paul Scott Wilson, a leading professor of homiletics at the University of Toronto likes to say, “The gospel is about God’s saving acts. For the gospel to be the gospel, there needs to be trouble. God doesn’t save us from nothing. God always saves us from something.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, the gospel is meaningless apart from the law. There must be awareness of a real need for healing and wholeness, and for the gospel to be the gospel; God must be the one who acts to make it happen.

In addition, Wilson uses and credits work by Herman Stuempfle, Jr. as having helped shape his understanding of preaching the gospel in a way that connects with real life and is also able to be received by the hearers. Stuempfle details this in his brief but important book, *Preaching Law and Gospel*.

Stuempfle writes that one way to understand the law is as “the hammer of judgment.” In this method the preacher hammers home words of judgment – words that declare the audience unworthy. It points clearly to their sin(s) and the simple proclamation of the gospel in response is one that we are all familiar with: We are guilty, and God forgives us. Classic preaching has often used this language: sin, judgment and guilt, forgiveness.

But Stuempfle rightly understands that there are many other experiences and paradigms for law. A helpful way is to see the law as “mirror of reality.” Here the preacher illustrates the dilemmas in the lives of the hearers: brokenness, pain, alienation, etc. Connecting at this level helps people own their own brokenness and need for someone or something to help them out of the messes they find themselves in. In sharing these the preacher draws out the need for gospel from within the hearer.

It is here we see Stuempfle’s great contribution. He defines the gospel as the “antiphon of existence.” This is a beautiful phrase that should be in the tool kit of every Lutheran preacher and at the center of the preaching enterprise. If the law announces judgment, then the gospel antiphon is forgiveness. But we experience law and brokenness in many other ways as well. So if the law announces “alienation, doubt, despair, meaninglessness, emptiness, brokenness and transiency, then the gospel’s answer would be “unification, trust, hope, meaning, fullness, healing and enduringness.”<sup>12</sup>

It is the same law and the same problem – our lives fall short. But the hearer is more likely to be drawn into the dilemma using law as mirror rather than law as hammer, at least most of the time. This does not mean that the law is never received as the hammer of judgment. But it does mean that there are a lot more doorways to the life and heart of the hearer than just that hammer. Using all of these doorways over an extended a period of time gives God many more ways and places to work in each person’s life.

This means that one of the central tasks of the preacher is to connect the trouble in the text he or she is preaching from to the struggles in the lives of hearers. Paul Scott Wilson refers to this as the “felt need.” If preaching does not understand what the felt needs of the hearers are and how the text connects to them, it will be very difficult to preach a relevant and meaningful sermon that hits home. And if preaching does not impact the felt needs of real lives for people, then it is unlikely to be transformational in the places where people perceive their lives need the most change. If discipleship requires transformation of who we are now into who Christ is forming us to be, then it is essential that preaching connect with those places in our lives where transformation is not only needed but even longed for.

If this is done well, then as God’s saving acts in and around the text bring hope and life within Scripture, that same hope is declared and manifested in the act of preaching and can be heard and experienced in the lives of the hearers. Every sermon needs to be conscious of how the preacher is using law and gospel theologically in order to make the preached Word relevant to the lives of the hearers and faithful to our understanding of the Word of God. Doing this is the best and perhaps only way to offer hope that is grounded and real, not just pie in the sky.

For many hearers, their lives are complex and sometimes filled with pain and confusion. In the congregation I currently serve there are about one hundred people in attendance each week. Within those families are people dealing with the aftermath of teen suicide, wrestling with cancer, aging and losing their ability and independence, struggling as sandwich generations raising kids and caring for aging parents, and on and on. As I am writing this, a woman who seems too young to die had a brain aneurism burst and is now on life support. Her family members are wondering what to do and how long to wait before

taking a course of action. In addition, there was a shooting just a block from the church last week. A fourteen-year-old girl was shot. She didn't die and they caught the shooter. We are probably just as safe this week as we were before the shooting – it was not a random act of violence. But people are nervous and there is anxiety that wasn't there a week ago. This is not all that unusual – it is just a week in the lives of a group of real people.

Grace that doesn't acknowledge the brokenness and the anxiety of peoples' reality sounds "meaningless" and "irrelevant." These are both words that people often use to describe the church today. Even people who attend regularly and love the church may think much of what we say and do is meaningless and irrelevant. This clear articulating of *both* law and gospel, both trouble and grace, is central to a relevant and living Word. Perhaps the state of preaching lies at the heart of what ails the church and as we renew our preaching together, we also get to the core of what might help renew it!

The third function of the Word as expressed in our constitution is the call to preachers to make the texts clear(er). This is the place where the Bible gets the most attention in preaching the Word. Note that while this is very important, it is the third way we understand the Word behind the crucified and risen Jesus and behind the articulating of law and gospel. As source and norm, the Bible is not a destination of its own. The preacher must be focused on the current awareness of the congregation and preach to real people living real lives in real places. A person hearing the sermon should have his or her awareness and clarity increased as a result of the preaching of the Word.

As we discussed in the opening chapter, part of the dilemma we face is that people do not sense a meaningful connection between the preached Word, even if it starts with a lectionary text, and the role of Scripture in connecting them to God and influencing their lives. As a result, preaching from the Bible has generally not produced people who can articulate that the Bible shapes their decisions and actions in any meaningful way. Effective preaching will most likely need to be more explicit in this area, helping people see the connections and having clear articulation of how the text both comes to life and shapes our lives in the present.

Ultimately, this means that a sermon should release power – it should work to give it away. A person hearing the sermon should experience God’s power coming to them freely, simply because the gospel is grounded in God’s power in Christ being released and made available to them as grace. A sermon is to make grace real and available to people. Luther believed that a church that knows what grace is, where it comes from and how it works but which does not offer abundant access to that grace is the worst kind of church imaginable. The preaching task is specifically to proclaim this grace and make it present and available for the hearers.

As this chapter comes to a close, remember that these three understandings of the Word – the person of Jesus Christ, law and gospel (judgment and mercy), and Scripture – all need to be articulated in skillful and artful ways in every biblically grounded sermon. A sermon should help Scripture come alive and make connections that inform and shape the hearer. A sermon should dig deep into the struggles of life and include law and judgment and bring words of life and hope as the sermon includes gospel and grace. Finally, the real point of the sermon is to use the preached Word to reveal the crucified and risen Word, Jesus Christ, among the congregation. When this happens, people don’t just hear about Jesus, they meet him again, or maybe for the first time.

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

1. Think of the three ways that the Word finds expression in our understanding as expressed in our constitution. Each of these is an important expression of that Word. Each of the three are somehow to be clearly connected to and present in the preaching of the church – perhaps all three in every sermon.
  - a. Which of these three (Christ present in our midst, law and gospel, the Bible) are you most comfortable working with? Why?
  - b. Which of these is most challenging for you? Why?
2. Reflect on your last few sermons – either by reviewing the manuscripts or by listening/watching a recording of the actual messages being delivered.
  - a. How did you show people the crucified and risen Christ present in their midst?
  - b. In what ways did you express the struggles and burdens of law? How did you answer those burdens with good news that articulates God’s action as gospel?
  - c. What methods did you use and articulate clearly as you preached in order to deal with the Bible in ways that helped people grow in their depth and appreciation of the text as a gift from God?
3. Look at how you use law and gospel in your preaching by reviewing some recent sermons.
  - a. Do you have a pattern of favorite vocabulary that you use most often?
  - b. Is it the classic guilt and forgiveness model? Is it something else?
  - c. If you use diverse law-gospel language over time, are you consistent within your sermons so that whatever gospel language you use, it serves as a matching antiphon to the law language you used in that same message?



4. We have a clear problem connecting the use of the Bible in the sermon to the use of and connections of the Bible within the lives of people who attend our worship and listen to our preaching.
  - a. How do your sermons not only base their starting point on the Bible but also make links and encourage people to continue to see the Bible as meaningful and relevant to the rest of their week and the decisions they make?
  - b. What could you do to make this stronger in the future?

One mistake that I made too frequently in my early preaching was to underestimate the importance of emotion and to overestimate the usefulness of ideas. I know that I am not alone in this. This is a common trait that I have seen repeated in the preaching of many others too. Knowing this about my own preaching doesn't necessarily remove the tendency – I have to work at it intentionally.

The keys to dealing with emotional content in preaching come with careful attention to this in sermon preparation. Many of us may have even received some training discouraging us from including too much emotional content, but despite the heady nature of Lutheranism (which is a strength in many ways), the heart of faith includes the heart, which may seem obvious but it is easily underestimated in the sermon.

Preaching that communicates to the head but does not touch the heart leaves a big gap for the Holy Spirit to cross. Of course, faith is ultimately God's doing and God can accomplish some pretty amazing things, but there is a well-known proverb that says, "The longest journey is the 18 inches from the head to the heart." The effective preacher will work to craft and aim some of the content at the heart to begin with to help make sure that 18-inch journey doesn't present a barrier or daunting challenge to the hearer.

Someone as heady as Karl Barth understood that ideas and reason rarely precede faith and trust. Faith is not something that can be assembled logically given the nature of God and our limited human ability to understand such things. In fact, the very need to make faith logical can be counterproductive. Barth was not a big fan of the theological discipline known as "apologetics." In his little book entitled *Church Dogmatics*, he looks at the Apostles' Creed and makes clear from the beginning that faith has a subjective reality (trust) and that doctrinal work (like the creeds) then gives content to the object of that faith (which is God). Barth writes, "The Creed explains this 'in,' this object of faith, by which our subjective faith lives. It is noteworthy that apart from the first expression 'I believe', the Confession is silent upon the fact of faith."<sup>13</sup>

In other words, the faith stance we hold frames the rationale by which we make sense of the act of believing in our lives. This is important because, in general, most people don't know *why* they believe first; they only know that they *do* believe. Then they have to make sense of it. The heart almost always goes first in this and then the head works to help us make sense of it and construct a worldview within which our faith helps us function. In fact, there is much developmental insight to show that the head without the heart is a faith that lacks the base from which people find the passion and strength to pursue discipleship as a life commitment. Yet those with faith that is deep in the heart but with far less knowledge and content are able to engage and be engaged in life-changing ways.

This is one reason that young people who learn their catechism, as important as the content is, still often share that they do not yet feel like they believe it. The result is that a high percentage of youth complete catechism and are confirmed but almost immediately begin to participate less and less in the life of the church. To know something is an important part of this, but it is not the same as believing or trusting. Helping people believe and grow in faith and faithfulness requires emotional content at the center. Preachers and teachers who learn this will find their work having an increased impact on themselves as well as the hearers who receive the fruits of this work.

Francis Spufford writes about this reality in his book *Unapologetic*. The subtitle is really his thesis and worth including here: "*Why, despite everything, Christianity can still make surprising emotional sense.*" His insights are helpful and anyone interested in preaching or evangelism (i.e., communicating the faith) would benefit from reading it.

Essentially, his argument is a simple one: the vast majority of people are more likely to come to faith through their emotional centers than through rational intellect. This seems like an obvious truth since faith is beyond reason. It doesn't mean that reason is irrelevant to faith, just not its locus. In conversational terms, faith is more a matter for the heart than the head.

Here is how Spufford describes his own self-understanding of his faith life:

Every Sunday I say and do my best to mean the whole of the Creed, which is a series of propositions. No dancing about; no moving target, I promise. But it is still a mistake to suppose that it is assent to the propositions that makes you a believer. It is the feelings that are primary. I assent to the ideas because I have the feelings; I don't have the feelings because I've assented to the ideas.<sup>14</sup>

This awareness should impact the way every preacher approaches the task of preaching. There is a need to gain insight and understand the text, its background and the things that help us make sense of it in its place and time. And then there is an essential move that the preacher must make in order to shift from a lecture to a sermon. She or he must allow that text the space to transcend place and time and speak to the lives of people in the here and now. That move is not achieved through analogy alone, but also by seeing what God is doing in and through the text and then watching for God to continue to act in that way in the present and for that work to not only make sense to the head but also to tug at the heart for each person hearing the sermon.

To make this happen in preaching, the sermon will most often need to have strong emotional content. There is, of course, the argument that this can be manipulative, and there is that very real risk. But the alternative is to play it safe and avoid anything emotional, which will almost guarantee that the sermon will not speak to the hearts of the people present and fall flat.

We have a choice – risk being manipulative or virtually guarantee ineffectiveness. Our integrity calls for us to be careful about the manipulative risks, but our calling demands that we preach the gospel effectively and therefore must touch people at an emotional level. The effective preacher will boldly look for ways to authentically touch the hearts of the hearers, not as a way of showing off his or her skillfulness, but as a means of helping create a space and experience where people open up and are able to see and encounter God at work in their midst. This was Luther's goal for preaching – an encounter with a living God.

Emotional content always requires narrative. There is a relational connection that has to take place in order for emotions to take on significance. If a person sees in the news that a young person in Asia was shot in a riot, their reaction is likely to be very slight. But if later the same day that same person discovers that there has been an uprising at the local school and their own child has been killed, the reaction will be gut wrenching and deep. On the surface, the two stories are the same – two children have been killed before their time – but there are two very different reactions. One is perceived as distant, minimally relevant information; the other touches the heart at its very core. The relationship makes all the difference.

Of course, there is no way that preaching can touch the heart as deeply as the tragic and unexpected death of someone we love. In fact, any effort to touch people that deeply and personally week after week would have to be forced and would most likely venture into being manipulative.

On the other hand, if preaching routinely lacks strong and relevant emotional content, then the sermon may inform and even entertain, but it will most likely struggle to open up the places where God can most easily transform people. The good preacher will constantly strive to see how the message shows God at work, watch for God working in similar ways in the world and scour numerous sources and situations for examples of God's work. The preacher will then proclaim the gospel in ways that not only communicate a theme clearly but also illuminate the theme happening in real, meaningful and heart-touching ways.

There are two primary ways that the preacher can communicate significant emotional content in a sermon.

The first is through personal and honest expression of emotion showing the passion and authenticity of the pastor's own engagement with the material. If people sense that this material hasn't touched the preacher's heart it will be very difficult for them to let it touch theirs. It is not unusual for a sermon to fall flat because it was clear that the preacher had not yet personally wrestled with the material. He or she may have understood the text and theme so that the theme was explained it with great knowledge and clarity but fell short of

sharing it from a place where it had been lived and felt. While this can be tricky, since our personal stories can get in the way as well as illuminate, being sure the preacher knows and feels the text are both important. People can sense it! Preaching today is received on the basis of both the content and the authenticity that the hearer senses is present in the act preaching.

Another way to communicate at an emotional level is through the use of stories. Narratives carry more than information. They bring characters and relationships and can make clear what cannot be explained with just ideas and statements. Narratives work by “showing” the hearers something that only happens within a story and can’t be fully seen, experienced or understood apart from it. Stories communicate on multiple levels and emotions are naturally touched and stirred in the telling of a meaningful story. And a story does not have to be historically true to communicate truth; a good story touches the heart and the hearer simply recognizes the truth of the story in their heart. This is the power of the heart when someone sees himself or herself somewhere in the story or begins to internally augment a story with their own experiences and feelings.

Because the gospel is an incarnational reality, any gospel point that cannot be “shown” in some narrative way does not have the luxury of being preached yet. Because the gospel is incarnational by nature, it is also a story-shared message. Whatever point the preacher wants people to understand and take to heart, she or he must be able to “show” through narratives that make the gospel real and life impacting. This, and only this, can invite most people to have their hearts touched and opened for the Spirit to do its work.

In other words, if you cannot include meaningful, real life story(ies) that show people that what you are talking about has legs and relevance, then you are probably not yet ready to preach from the text. This is a harsh truth and all of us can remember times when we have dug desperately to find something – anything – close to the truth(s) we were trying to share. My guess is that all of us have had the experience of preaching a weak sermon because all we had were ideas strung together that were long on platitudes and short on incarnational reality. It isn’t just having the right words. It’s having them able to take on flesh in some very real way. The gospel is not a proposition but an incarnational truth about the saving work of God.

Now before we all panic, sometimes the biblical story is enough. Not every example has to come from this morning's experiences or last night's newscast. But if the biblical story is the one that is going to use to communicate emotional content and incarnational truth, the preacher needs to tell the story well and flesh out the text beyond the written words on the page and commentaries. Storytelling is an important part of good preaching. Well-told biblical stories are powerful and contain deep truth. Told poorly, they can fade into the scenery and seem archaic, but told well, they can stand as a powerful witness and touch and open the hearts of listeners.

At the same time, if the only examples we routinely lift up are two thousand or more years old, eventually another truth begins to win out. People begin to think one of two things. One option is that God simply doesn't work in the world today the way God used to work in the biblical world. Many people already think this is the case, so it isn't a position we want to add gravity to! The other option is that God may be doing things in today's world, but not even the preacher seems to know or recognize what they are. It is either unknowable or irrelevant. In either case, the sermon has left the listener floundering.

So where are we to draw stories from that are relationally close and touch the heart in genuine and non-manipulative ways? Obvious places include television, movies, novels, history, human-interest news stories, etc. These are all potentially great sources of stories and often provide excellent ways to make a point come alive and touch the heart.

I am reminded of a recent sermon where the information I had was solid and I had learned some things that week about the righteousness of God. I had done my exegetical due diligence and it had paid off. I had great content and a solid lecture was well under way. But it was not yet a sermon – there were lots of ideas but no incarnational stuff underneath it. I could not, for the life of me, find a way to show people what righteousness looked like in a way that would touch their hearts with any depth. How was this to become alive and real for all of us and touch hearts in a way that would allow God to transform us through it?

Then I remembered a scene from the BBC series, "Call the Midwife." The scene was amazing when I watched it and it had touched me at a deep and emotional level. Reflecting

on the sermon's message, it suddenly dawned on me why I was so touched by the scene. It truly was an example of genuine righteousness. In the final sermon, there was solid content and teaching within the message, but the heart of the sermon was the telling of this amazing and emotionally powerful story – one that was spot on for the message and had not an ounce of manipulation within it. What could have remained an excellent lecture was transformed by that story into a meaningful sermon. Why? Because, in the process, the sermon was able to show people something of what God looks like in the flesh. What was at risk of being a flop turned into something much more useful and impactful. From the conversations afterward, it was clear that people saw and understood the righteousness of God in very real ways. Phew!

Note three things about the process. First, the prep included time with the text, doing exegetical work, and exploring one or more aspects of the text (in this case, digging into the biblical notion of “righteousness” proved life-giving for me). Second, it required discerning and articulating what it was that I would use as the doorway to help people see and encounter something of the God we meet in Christ through this text – a way to envision and embrace God's saving actions. Third, my preparations included time watching and searching for somewhere in the world – in life – where we see this happening that I could share and call attention to. In the case of this sermon, in spite of all the time and work I had put in throughout the entire week, although I had watched the episode from which I took the story weeks before, the incarnational connection for this message didn't find me until Saturday!

These three things were the big blocks of preparation guided by the Spirit: prayerful and studious immersion in the text, discernment and articulation of the gospel through the text, and incarnational realities of the gospel for proclamation. The best sermons will include attention to all three of these aspects. *But it must get to and draw from the work done in the third part – incarnational realities - because this provides the place where people see the gospel happen and is the primary place where preaching can show people God at work today and touch their hearts. The gospel is incarnational – always!*



# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

1. When you think of how you function most naturally, would you describe yourself as a “head” person or as a “heart” person? How do you think this impacts the way you approach preaching?
2. Make a timeline of your life and list at least ten significant things that have happened (good and/or bad alike) over the course of your lifetime.
  - a. For each event, reflect on what God did or was doing in and through that time in your life.
  - b. Write the stories out including not only descriptions of the events, but also using sentences that articulate what you now understand what God was up to as you went through these important times.
3. Look at the list of stories you made in the above question.
  - a. Write a theme sentence with God as the subject for each story. In addition, think about those themes and how you have seen them as you have read and interpreted Scripture as a preacher.
  - b. How might these stories be useful examples for you to share in sermons?
    - i. Are any of them too risky to share in some ways in preaching? If so, what makes you come to that conclusion?
    - ii. How many of these stories have you told the congregation in preaching already?
    - iii. Knowing that stories can be told more than one way, are any that you have already told, still useful in some way that may warrant telling them again or in a new way?

4. Look at the manuscripts or listen to the recordings of the last few sermons you have given.
  - a. How did you create authentic emotional content that helped people see the gospel as you preached to be real, relevant and incarnational?
  - b. What narratives did you use to show God at work?
  - c. If you had a chance to augment these sermons in some way(s) to make them more incarnational and emotionally compelling, what could you do to make the ideas be more alive as you preached?

“What really bothers me incessantly is the question... who Christ really is for us today?”  
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Very few people come to worship in order to hear what God did. It is not that they don't benefit from reminders of God's past faithfulness and activity. Texts throughout the Old Testament have God routinely reminding people of what God did in the Exodus. It was a way of reminding Israel that God had a track record and could be counted on. Remembering the past is an essential part of building faith. Remembering is an important part of what we do as a church when we gather.

A key reason for this is that we don't preach the gospel from scratch or in a vacuum each Sunday. We stand on the witness and actions of a God who has been at work since before the beginning of the world and has been involved in humankind since the first people. Even the words of Jesus recalled and spoken as we prepare to receive communion include the charge to “do this in remembrance of me.”

So there is no excuse for leaving out what God has done in the past in an effort to keep things fresh in the present. There is ample evidence that people really do want to know the stories and know that the church they attend is grounded in something more than the latest passing trend or one particular leader's newest whim. Having a history is essential to having something lasting to offer and for staying connected with a God who spans all time and human situations.

This means that words like “was” and “did” are an important part of telling the story. It is not our job to write a new story each week but to continue to tell the one big story that encompasses and shapes all other stories. Like many serial television shows, a review of what happened in previous episodes is important for bringing people back up to speed and helping first time viewers enter the story. Because the story is immense and our audience is always shifting from week to week, remembering and reviewing should always be more than a thirty-second highlight reel!

Don't stop with the review comments though. Ultimately, worship is *built on the foundation* of what God has done and not just recounting the history of what God has done. This is an important distinction. In the Lutheran tradition the focus of each gathering is that God shows up today and is present in the midst of the congregation now. Liturgy and preaching work together to communicate this. Lutherans understand that the celebration of communion each week places Christ in the present – in the midst of the gathered congregation and their lives. We believe and teach that eating the bread and drinking from the cup are participation in the tangible “real presence” of Christ. Our worship tradition is grounded and engaged in a horizontal commitment. We do not worship a God who is “up there” and watching us from a distance; we worship an incarnational God who is “right here” and who comes to be among us right now.

This means that in addition to remembering the past, the key to meaningful engagement is the ability to use the present tense with integrity. Too much of what we do and work with is weighted in the past. I recently attended a major event with a guest preacher whose sermon was delivered with energy – well presented. But over three quarters of the message explained the problems in a biblical setting and left them there, stuck in history. Most of the sermon was overly focused on the past and, frankly, offered almost nothing for the present. While the sermon was dynamic in delivery, it was ultimately weak in helping people encounter God in their daily life today. As a result, the sermon's bottom line felt more like law (we can't let ourselves be caught in the same snares as the people of Corinth) rather than gospel (God is at work among us declaring us one in Christ, even when we struggle to live that out).

It is essential that we don't repeat that same mistake over and over. It is easy to do because commentaries and other references can give us great information about the text, historical setting, social context, etc. The temptation is to assume that because the authors of these commentaries and histories are obviously bright, well-studied people, then sharing their material will certainly be helpful. Plus, because it is so readily available – online and in our bookcases – it is the easiest part of the sermon to prepare. Most of us have about 15-20 minutes to preach each week and giving a good overview of this

material can seem (to us as preacher) to only scratch the surface. But it can also consume a high percentage of the time we have available to preach. Suddenly a sermon based on something from Jeremiah is overflowing with history and geography lessons about the Exile. While some of this may be essential and helpful, it leaves less time for what needs to happen that day with the people who are present and listening with anticipation and hope.

Some of this problem is implicit in having developed our preaching within creedal Christianity. Designed to overcome controversy and division, creedal Christianity was developed to address major issues under debate and give final pronouncement on the correct answers. That meant the leaders and officials involved were primarily looking backward and trying to explain what was. At the time of these councils, their concern for these issues was certainly fresh and in the present tense for them, but they grounded their thinking and answers in making statements about the past that were intended to put the controversies to rest once and for all. They were working faithfully in response to questions that plagued them in their era. As important as these issues are, however, some of those concerns may not be the big questions that people are asking today when they come to church or read the Bible.

Because the creeds were providing answers to the meaning of historical events surrounding the life and nature of Jesus, they used almost no present tense verbs or examples in their work. A look at the Apostles Creed, for example, shows that the creed is grounded in the present tense, “I believe.” But within the first article there are no other verbs to describe God in creation. Most of the second article is past tense. Jesus, “was born, suffered, was crucified, died, was buried...” There are no references to preaching, teaching, or healing and the creed’s only present tense verb states that Jesus “is seated” (not the most dynamic activity he could be up to). The only future tense phrase states that Jesus “will come again” (but in the meantime, since there aren’t any present tense verbs for God, it seems like we might be on our own). The third article lists a bunch of nouns, “forgiveness, resurrection, etc.” and somehow shares the fiery and windy work of the Holy Spirit in what seems to be the least dynamic ways possible – not a single verb!

Now, I know some will say that I have left out all of the good theology that is expressed and can be done with the creed. I want to be clear that I fully agree. In fact, Luther's Small Catechism offers meanings to the three articles of the creed that are filled with present tense verbs. It is important to note that five hundred years ago, Martin Luther already had seen how removed the language of the Apostles Creed was from the present day lives of people in his day. The catechism was designed to replace static nouns and weak past tense verbs with more dynamic and active present tense ones. Many of us would be of great help to the people in our congregations if we recited Luther's meanings more often and the Apostles Creed less frequently.

If we are honest, unless the creed is accompanied by good, missional teaching each week, it simply says what it says. Imagine a typical Sunday morning. You get to the creed. It's the one thing we do in worship in such a way as to prompt a guest to think it's actually important to know what it says. We all recite together our core beliefs about God – perhaps even with boldness – that while God used to be busy, right now God's not up to much, but some day Jesus will come back and God hopefully will be busy again.

Now, as a visitor to worship for the first time in a long time (or maybe ever), imagine that we receive this as the bottom line. We came hoping to find God – active and real. We only showed up because we were hungry to find out what God was up to in our confused and struggling life. Then we find that we ended up in a church focused on a God who used to be active and real but is not so much so in the present. Is this what you needed? Is it what brought you to church in the first place? Is it even likely to change the lives of the people who attend regularly?

Missional preaching will impact every aspect of the language we use in worship. It would be a mistake to limit "preaching," to only what we say during the sermon. It is the full impact of the proclamation of God's saving and life-changing acts in Christ that we are looking at. Every piece of the liturgy declares something. Is it doing what we believe it is supposed to do? Or is it perpetuating practices that we have continued without examination and thoughtful reflection?

This is not a call to abandon the Apostles Creed or even jettison its use in worship. But it is a call to be aware that preaching in a creedal tradition can default to explaining and clarifying doctrines as a way of cultivating theological content. But too much emphasis on this leaves the hearer with a cursory understanding of the past and few touchstones to make it come alive in the present.

Having said that, it is then left up to the preacher to cultivate a sense of the present as the focus of preaching within the sermon. This focus on the present is framed by both the ongoing faithfulness of God in the past and the anticipated fulfillment of the reign of God in the future. All tenses matter for the story to be told well. The faithfulness of the past *and* the promise of the future always helps the hearer to live with engagement in this time that is “already but not yet,” the space in between the coming of Christ and the fulfillment of God’s reign. It is into this moment that the gospel is to be proclaimed.

For the gospel to be the gospel, God must be the subject of most of the sentences we use. The gospel is not a value or a truth apart from the saving activity of God in Christ. It is the activity of God in Christ that forms the basis for all that is true about life. Therefore, one place the preacher can and should pay close attention to is the subject of sentences. Do a significant number of sentences in the sermon have God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit as the primary actor? If we believe that God is the primary actor, then does our preaching give the lead role to an active God every time we preach?

Second, are present tense verbs a focus of the message? If God is doing something among us, tell us and show us what it is! It is safe to say that God “was” doing something in Scripture. That conclusion is what makes the scriptures Scripture in the first place! We can all agree that God was up to something that is shared within the pages of the Bible and is worth talking about.

The hearer comes to worship to hear preaching that moves from that foundational and somewhat obvious starting point to the discernment that they hope comes through preaching: “Help me see that the God who ‘did’ that back then is still ‘doing’ something

here and now!” That is the cry and longing of the hearts of the congregation and the fundamental call to the preacher.

Attending to this requires a two-fold approach.

First, as we preach, we need to be intentional about moving the text and its dynamics forward and into the present. Even the mechanics of how a story is told can move it forward or backward in hearer’s experience. For example, the preacher can say, “As we explore this text, we see that Jesus did this, did that, etc.” That method of storytelling leaves the hearer in the present and Jesus in the past.

A more effective approach is to unite the hearer and the text: “As we join with Jesus today, we see Jesus do this, doing that, etc.” Keeping the biblical story and the experiential window of the hearer in the same time zone can make a huge difference.

But second, and far more important, the spirituality of the speaker and the hearers need to be augmented to have a real, present tense quality. This means the preacher needs to develop the “eyes of the heart” to see God at work in the present and to see through the text as a doorway to the present actions of God. This builds on the material already discussed in the previous chapter. For this to have integrity, the preacher must develop his or her own spiritual life to be more vibrant, present tense and dynamic. Leaders engaged in the personal work of spiritual formation often benefit from pursuing continuing education opportunities to enhance their abilities to help form disciples. Many would also do well to receive coaching and spiritual direction to help them reflect on their ministry and personal faith and move or stretch beyond their current comfort zones and abilities.

A final thought on language. Good preaching draws the hearer into the conversation. When many of us were in seminary, we were taught to use the “royal we” as a good way to include everyone. “Don’t draw too much attention to yourself,” they would say.

Perhaps times have changed or perhaps that wasn’t even the best advice then. Either way, the “royal we” does not drive much home or create a connection or relationship in today’s



world. It is still useful sometimes, but with more discernment as opposed to assuming it as the default position.

However, the careful use of “I” stories is essential to effective preaching. If you as the preacher can’t tell me how God is at work in your life, how on earth will what you are sharing encourage me as a hearer to believe that there is hope for me to see how God is at work in mine?

There are cautions though. When we preach, we should be careful not to lift ourselves up too often as the ideal to be copied. Nor should we spill our guts in a way that is gratuitous, cathartic, or distracting. But sharing stories from our faith journey that are well thought out – triumphs, struggles and discoveries – is essential for helping others risk exploring and talking about what God is doing in their journeys as well. Sharing honest and real commitment is also a base from which to encourage others to deeper and more meaningful commitment as well.

The word “you” in English is also a wonderful gift. Unlike most languages where singular and plural forms exist, in English the words for “you” are the same. This means that when a preacher says, “God is speaking to you...”, the congregation can be addressed collectively and encouraged to think as a community of faith. At the same time, each person senses they are being addressed as an individual. A simple, “Jesus is calling you/inviting you/hoping you...” may be the words that touch someone in a way that changes their understanding or stirs their imagination of how they use their hands, feet and voice all week long.

Language is the medium through which preaching happens. It can be a powerful tool and gift. If you write out sermons before you preach them, it can be helpful to go back through the completed manuscript and see what percentage of it references the past and the context of the text and what percentage is dedicated to the present and how God is acting and speaking through the text today. Also look at sentences and see how often God is the subject and an active and present tense verb is connected to it. If you’re not in the habit of writing your sermons in advance, try recording yourself and listen for the mix of past

and present language to help you reflect on how you communicate and to strengthen your preaching for next time.

In all of this, our goal is to not to over focus in our preaching about what God *did*. Even more so, it is to lift up what the gracious God who has come to us and is coming to us in Jesus is *doing* in our midst, and then help people encounter and engage this present reality with their lives and entire being.

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

1. Look over a few previous sermon manuscripts or listen to the recordings. Listen carefully for tenses as you do. How often are your sentences and ideas expressed in the past tense? How often do you use present tense verbs as you share your messages?
2. Review the subjects of sentences in sermons as well. How many times do you have God (God, Jesus, the Spirit, etc.) as the subject of sentences? Is God the main actor in your preaching or are ideas the main thrust?
3. During the week, visit some of the people who were in worship the previous Sunday. With no hints ask them, “I am curious about your spiritual life and how you see God. When is the most recent time you recall a meaningful encounter with God where you were confident that God was present and involved?”
  - a. How many of them struggle to think of an answer?
  - b. How many of them share something from a while back (prior to attending worship last week)?
  - c. How many said that they had a meaningful encounter with God in worship?
  - d. How do these answers help you begin to understand the people for who you lead preaching and worship?
4. Look at your liturgical language and practices in the worship environment that surrounds and frames your preaching.
  - a. How does it advance the idea that God is present, active and involved in worship?
  - b. Do you tend to use a wide variety of liturgical language, settings and practices or do you tend to have a more consistent pattern? Is this an intentional or unintentional practice?
  - c. If someone is new to your congregation’s worship and encountered communion, how would they know what is happening as you share the bread and the cup – based solely on what you articulate during the worship time and assuming little or no previous knowledge?

If you watch how professional media people set up communication, you will notice right away that the majority of things they do rely on more than one person. Watch the evening news and there will be someone on the national news desk and two people – co-anchors – at most local news desks. These anchor people serve as a sort of MC for the program sharing stories, giving introductions and handing the microphone off to someone else who is often present on the scene in the world outside the studio. There are live stories from the field, special reports to give in-depth insights, analysts getting underneath or behind the stories, panels of people offering varying viewpoints and expertise, weather, sports and human-interest stories. In most cases, all of these people, with the help of editors and a technical crew, condense a mix of stories and voices into a thirty-minute program. Take out the average of eight minutes for commercials and all of this happens in about twenty-two minutes – not much longer than the length of a typical sermon within the framework of a one-hour worship service.

Of course, there are still notable exceptions to this. TED Talks use a prescribed window of time that is less than eighteen minutes long for one person to present to an audience. These talks are wildly successful and often provide a doorway to greater exposure for those people chosen to be on the TED stage. But these speakers are also carefully selected because of their expertise or innovation in a specific field and their ability to be focused, insightful and interesting. As fascinating as TED Talks can be, you'll never hear the same person give them week after week for years on end – it never happens, and it never will. A variety of voices, experiences and topics is at the heart of what TED Talks are all about.

This means that while one of the assets a typical preacher has is his or her relationship with the people in the congregation, a drawback in most settings can be that the preacher is the only voice that most people hear week after week after week. This may not be completely true in multi-staff settings where there is a rotation of more than one preacher, but even in those settings the circle of speakers tends to be relatively small, often just two people. How do we begin to provide for a diversity of voices when we are preparing and

delivering the sermon in the context of congregational life? How can we learn from and, at least occasionally, offer a diversity of voices similar to that being modeled and utilized effectively by so many others in our world?

In this section, we will explore that question and how we can begin to answer it. As I've mentioned in previous chapters, none of this is exhaustive but perhaps it will offer you some interesting ideas or arouse your creativity for trying something new in your ministry setting. Thinking about this and trying some things will lead to new ideas and approaches of your own for adding voices to the sermon in ways that help all of us become more imaginative in preaching the gospel.

One of the first ways to improve the diversity of voices in the sermon is to simply plan to have someone else speak within the framework of the sermon. This is an obvious but rarely practiced truth. A simple rule of thumb is, whenever the preacher has a good and meaningful story that makes the gospel come to life, he or she should ask, "Who is the best person to tell it?"

Historically, the assumed answer to that question had only one logical choice – the preacher. This is the pattern within which we have functioned for generations and it is the only model that many people in our congregations have ever experienced. It is also the model that almost all preaching students are trained in as they study, learn and practice preaching during their seminary education. Almost all of us are trained to find universal stories that illustrate the gospel happening, include them in our message and then tell them as we preach, but in many cases the most useful stories happen close to home and in our communities.

As a theology of incarnation takes root, we are reminded that God in Christ is at work in all sorts of places. That includes us! Mission was once thought of as what other people did in faraway places, but an evolving awareness has changed this (mostly for the better). Now mission also includes an understanding of how each of us participates with what God is up to in the world. The most powerful illustrations may no longer come from some amazing and inspiring person who answered God's call to give up everything and move to a new

and dangerous place. Some of the most powerful examples and stories often come from closer to home because such things remind all of us that God can and does use each of us.

Here is a great principle to try to apply in making the Bible come to life in ways that are grounded and received as authoritative and transformational. When the preacher finds a narrative that advances the sermon's message faithfully and that story involves someone in the congregation, the person in the story should share it whenever possible (instead of the "preacher"). Of course, sharing local stories involving local people requires some awareness of what is appropriate to share, confidentiality, etc. but these things are easily navigated if the preacher is intentional and communicates with the people involved to agree on what will be shared together. Preaching like this is more communal as a result – it is a bit of a team effort with the preacher serving as a mix of "preacher," augmented with work as "facilitator" and "director."

As God dwells within the people of the congregation and works within and through them, there are incarnational examples everywhere. The best stories are told firsthand, when possible. That means inviting others to the microphone and stepping aside to give the person to whom the story belongs the space to share it in their own voice and words.

Doing this is not necessarily easy, especially early in the development of this kind of work. People are often hesitant to "preach" because it seems like an intimidating thing that is only done by "trained professionals." Not everyone is an accomplished, confident storyteller in front of others. Having some storytelling skills is definitely an asset, but not having these skills shouldn't be a deal breaker. This means that the people invited to become a voice within the sermon need to be chosen well, given some coaching and preparatory help in sharing the story in helpful and concise ways, and offered a chance to practice ahead. Also, they benefit from being given a clear window of time within which to work – a specific amount of time to tell their story before returning the microphone to the preacher.

Such a sermon might take shape like this. The sermon begins in ways that shape the message for the week clearly and well, perhaps not in ways that vary much from many others. But at a point in the sermon where sharing an incarnational example is helpful, the

preacher says, “As I thought about these things this week, I was reminded of an incident Emily shared with me and I realized that Emily actually experienced some of what we are thinking about this week. So I have asked her if she would share her story. Emily, would you please come up and share?”

Emily then comes forward to a microphone or has one clipped on. She tells her story, “A few weeks ago, I...”

When possible, it is good if people like Emily, through coaching and reflecting prior to the opportunity to tell their stories, can not only share the story but also share the incarnational and theological connections. Help your storyteller to go beyond recounting events. Help them use “God” as the subject and active, present tense verbs in theologically connecting statements as they interpret their stories for those who are listening. This helps members of the congregation become a voice in the preaching and it assists them in building a useful vocabulary to draw on in their daily life. Adding voices to our sermons is also an equipping method to build the capacity of people to connect biblically grounded preaching to more theologically alert living.

Another method that works well is doing an interview. This often works well when someone has had a more in-depth experience with a longer timeframe that has led to some faith informed insights. Although this may seem like a minor detail, because interviews tend to be longer than the kinds of stories suggested in the previous section, having a place to sit and face each other changes the setting and can add its own helpful dimension. I have a set of barstools and when an interview is planned as part of the sermon, we bring those out and the person(s) being interviewed sit with me for something more conversational in nature. Because speaking publicly is a common source of stress for many people, this also has had a significant effect in lowering the anxiety of many of the people I have interviewed. Sitting down for a conversation, even one that other people listen in on, is very different and generally less emotionally taxing than standing up, facing a group of people and giving a speech (especially if we call that speech a “sermon”).

Sources of interviews once again can come from the congregation and the preacher's awareness of the stories and journeys that people have experienced or are still actively engaged in. For example, in the setting where I serve, we have had several interviews over the years. These have included a conversation with a multigenerational family about passing faith on to the next generation; a heart transplant patient about seeing life when you have a second chance; and a person who experienced St. John's "dark night of the soul" after a serious fall at work that resulted in multiple surgeries, months of residential rehab and premature "retirement" on disability. In each case I, as the pastor, had been able to accompany these people in some way during their story's unfolding. I had seen and heard about their experiences and how they had felt or not felt God during them. There was a clear sense that they had grown spiritually or had some meaningful insight to share as a result of their life experiences. They had experienced and learned things that I only knew of through them. It was clear that they were the better choice to share what they not only knew but had been teaching me as well.

To help prepare people for an interview, clearly describe what the sermon will be about and how the insights of the person(s) being interviewed will help people envision and place the message in real life. Meeting with the interviewee(s) prior to the sermon is essential. Talking with them about the connections between the sermon's message and their insights makes the theme and connections clear for them and therefore clearer for the audience.

Eventually, we agree on a set of three or four questions that I will ask them during the interview conversation as part of the sermon. We don't script it and they can't bring notes, but knowing the questions ahead of time helps them be ready and confident as well as ensures them that they will not be surprised with a "gotcha" question out of left field. The preacher's job as the interviewer is to interact in ways that advance the story, glean the insights and help the interviewees to do well at sharing their faith.

While the length of this chapter doesn't allow for a host of stories of how this has played out, I can say that I have never had an interview where the people being interviewed didn't have something deep and memorable to share. One woman shared from her experience of losing her son when he was in his twenties. She talked about how our children aren't



really ours – they belong to God. While I could have word for word said the same thing that she said, it would have likely been received as interesting and faithful but also a platitude. My kids were both very much alive. But for her to tell a group of people, many of whom had been present with her at her son’s funeral, that she had learned through her loss how much her children were really God’s children – that was truly amazing! Remember, it is not always just what is said, but also the authenticity from which it is said, that determines if the preaching is heard and received as authoritative and relevant or is just a nice story.

A word of caution as you do this. If you find people with deep experiences and powerful insights, because this is not scripted, you can still be caught off guard as the interviewer. Sometimes people share particular things as you prepare, but in the call to be clear and concise they actually say it better and in ways that may bring unexpected insights to them as a speaker during the interview in front of the congregation. I have found myself stunned (so far, always in good ways) by the powerful words that have come from laity who are given a voice from which to share their lives of faith. As the interviewer, be prepared to be surprised and even receive something in the midst of a message where you are not the speaker but are instead facilitating and listening. God can and likely will speak to you as well!

Another excellent way to facilitate adding voices to the sermon is to invite conversation in the pews or chairs of the sanctuary. Focusing a sermon’s message in a way that grounds it in a biblical text and then makes clear connections between the activity of God and the lives of the hearers can form a base from which to open up conversations during worship.

You can use the sermon as a base to prepare a couple of questions about where people have seen or experienced God in a similar way in their lives – their everyday contexts and experiences. Then have small groups of two to four people turn to their neighbors to discuss the questions and share with each other for just a few minutes. People will add their own incarnational examples to the work the preacher has started for them. If time, space and technology make it possible, debrief by asking if anyone has anything they’d like to share. A “popcorn” style response is one way to allow a few people to briefly share

and add new voices and life connections to the message. It can help to have at least one person prepped and ready to share first in order to loosen the anxiety in the group and give permission for others to speak second, third and beyond.

Finally, a method recently utilized by Dr. Paul Scott Wilson at an event where he was both a teacher and preacher offered an excellent chance for people to join their voices to his. He preached a clear sermon with clear connections from the text to life and clear theological commitments voiced in his message. He then shared a meaningful story from his life experience that showed this text to be more than just a proposition to be understood but a lived truth that had real flesh. When he was finished sharing his story, he set the stage in such a way that he could then open it up and ask, “Does anyone else have some experience of God at work in your life that you would like to share?” A handheld microphone was available, and several people shared faith stories in what became a biblically inspired time of testimony sharing.

While this may not work in every setting, especially in the midst of a communion liturgy with a one hour timeframe, it was a good example of the preacher laying strong biblical and exegetical groundwork, articulating the gospel and God’s actions clearly, and sharing a story in a way where the preacher “went first” with a clear hope that someone else would take the bait and go second, third and so forth. This could be used as an alternative format for midweek services during Advent or Lent, the basis for sharing stories of gratitude at Thanksgiving, or some other creative place where preaching may have more latitude and time than some Sunday settings.

The ability to add voices to the message is an incredible gift. Many of us have not had the imagination or felt permission to do this, but the insights gained and connections made can be amazing. It can be freeing and inspiring for members of our congregations.

This subject has been raised at the end of this book because it is an important bridge between the sermon and daily life. If we are going to use the Bible as a “book of faith” in ways that help form disciples, then preaching has to find ways to not only describe what people are to do, but also help them practice becoming and being disciples in daily life.

Almost no one feels confident on his or her own. We all benefit from being equipped and supported. A big part of discipleship includes speaking. We are all blessed when we have safe spaces in which we can stretch and thrive as we develop deeper insights about our journeys with God and then get to share them with others. Including people in some of the above ways allows them to both share with the conversation and gain confidence for living faithfully.

Sermons that point to what people can do but then don't find ways to help them actually do it leave people in a difficult place. People sense that they have almost everything they need to dig in and do the work but then find they lack something they need to actually do it. Unable to make the leap on their own, people often internalize that there is something wrong with them or that their faith in Christ is weak. Getting them close to the jumping off point but leaving them to jump on their own is debilitating over time and can become guilt producing as people think to themselves, "If only I were a better Christian or more like so and so, I would be able to..."

Helping people see how their story both connects them to and also continues the biblical story allows them to articulate their faith story – without apology or shame – in the context of a bigger story. Inviting them to publicly share it in the context of a biblically grounded message helps everyone see the Bible not just as book about "a long time ago in a faraway land" but more importantly as the "source and norm" for lives that continue to be impacted and useful to the God who has come to us in Jesus. Perhaps no practice can bridge that gap more clearly than inviting people to share their real stories of how the God they have met in Scripture is at work in them and among us all – right now.

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

1. Look at the text for the next two to three weeks. For each text, write a question that relates to the text and that people in the pews can answer. If this is new for you and the congregation, do not make them deep and complicated questions. Keep them simple and somewhat safe topics for conversation. Then, use one of these questions in an upcoming sermon and actually have people turn to a neighbor in the pew and discuss their answers. Keep the activity brief and light in nature – that is the best way to dip everyone’s toes in the water of participating during the sermon. If you feel able to do so, perhaps give a quick chance for people to “popcorn” a few answers back to the larger group if space and/or technology enable people to share and be heard in your setting.
2. Think through the people who regularly participate in worship in the congregation where you preach. Which people have had significant life experiences, major challenges, or unique stories to share? Make a list of the people whose life stories have a chapter that has intrigued you as they have shared their stories with you. Keep this available to you as you look at texts in the coming weeks and months.
3. Look at the texts for preaching over the next several weeks. Think about themes that seem to faithfully share what God is up to in the text and how God wants to be known through that text in today’s world. When is a text a good open door for the stories you reflected on in question #2 above and can you invite someone to come tell their story or be interviewed as a part of the sermon when that week arrives?
4. Sit down with the congregational directory and reflect on the people who make up the congregation and the work they do. It may be a paid occupation, volunteer activity or family care where they invest much of their time and energy. List the key occupational activity next to each person’s name. Then use this as you prepare worship and preaching over the next months. When a text points to vocation as a central way of understanding how Scripture informs and enlivens life today, use this list as a way of inviting some of these people to share – perhaps in an interview, a

panel discussion, or some other formats that work well for your setting. You can also find more about vocation and how faith and work intersect at a very good web site at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org), which has interviews, Bible studies, commentaries and more on this important way of connecting the Bible and daily life.

We have covered a lot of ground in the previous chapters. As we said in the Introduction, the material that we covered here is not intended to be exhaustive but instead to be supplemental. If preachers with a strong foundation then begin to use the content of this book as a way of strengthening their preaching, the hope is that sermons will take the good work that is already being done and apply it in new ways of making connections between Scripture, people and everyday life. The Book of Faith Initiative is hoping that these connections, now often fragile or even missing in the lives of too many of our people, can be restored and strengthened in the coming years.

So, as we come to an end of this volume, a few thoughts to tie up loose ends seems helpful.

One thing to reflect on is the fact that in order to do the kind of work that this book espouses, it will benefit the preacher to work further ahead than just working within the week prior to the sermon. If a preacher is going to invite others into the message, set up an interview, etc., then he or she needs to give people more than a few days' notice in most cases. Planning sermons over the course of a few weeks with overlapping preparation for more than one sermon at a time will be increasingly helpful. That doesn't mean that most weeks won't have a workflow and that preachers can't focus on one primary sermonic effort. Of course this will be essential. But some of the ideas in this book will benefit from working ahead for the enhancement of your preaching and the benefit of people who hear your sermons. Having said that, here are a few thoughts about how each of us can work through the process of preparing a strong sermon and make our preaching better.

Remember, the content of this book is in no way exhaustive. It intentionally does not deal with all the work that preachers should do to explore the text, get insights from Greek and Hebrew languages, study the social and historical contexts, reflect on how the pericope fits within the specific book of the Bible within which it resides, etc. Spending time with good commentaries to see what insights and background others can offer can be essential. Whatever exegetical skills the preacher possesses, he or she should use them and use them well. If you are reading this and functioning as a preacher already but you lack

adequate training in these areas, find ways to gain skills here. These are foundational to the work we all do and we skip it to our peril.

Having said that, a central goal of this book is to encourage preachers to make a real effort to work on every sermon with the Book of Faith mindset. In other words, don't have as your primary goal informing people about the text you are using. Your goal every week is to speak into the dilemmas that we all face as we live. The outcome from every sermon should be for people to encounter God in Christ within the message and desire to dig into the Bible to meet that God and discover more, even though they may not be familiar with the Bible and may be uncertain about Jesus. Every sermon is a chance to help people meet Jesus and be more curious about the Bible that bears witness to him. Cling to that goal in your preaching!

Next, and this is hard to sustain, put as much into each sermon as you can. Ben Hogan, a golfing legend, is often quoted on the golf course for having said, "The only shot in golf that matters is the next one." This is equally true in preaching. Remember that next Sunday is the best chance you have to do this work. Every sermon matters! Every chance to gather people on Sunday (or whatever day people gather where you preach) is the real deal. Put forth as much energy as you can into each and every sermon.

For someone in the congregation that day, it may be the best chance they have to discover how deeply God loves them and kindle a hunger for the biblical witness to that truth. Week in and week out, energy is hard to sustain, but do your very best to sustain it anyway. Find others with whom you can do this work as a source of energy, creativity and accountability. We preach to and also on behalf of the community of faith. Be sure to find ways to allow parts of that community to surround you and support you as you do this work.

Allowing yourself to live in each text and not just work with it as you prepare sermons does a lot to sustain one's spirit, energy and enthusiasm for God's Word and preaching. Every sermon is a space in which God will work in you and the congregation. Offering your very best every week will give God the biggest space within which to work.

As you do this work, keep in mind that you are NOT preaching the Bible. You are preaching FROM the Bible as source and norm of our witness to the living Word – Jesus. Every sermon is not primarily our chance to enlighten people about a whole host of insights about Scripture; it is a chance to use Scripture as a way of pointing to God in Christ. Most people don't come to be smarter and leave as biblical scholars. They come to discover or rediscover that they matter and that the God who came in Jesus and who continues to live and be present in their lives actually does love them. Be sure that people have the best opportunity possible to meet Jesus. By the way, this is not directly related to preaching, but this is one reason that preaching within a communion liturgy is such a blessing. We are freed to know that even if our sermon feels so-so or like a total flop, people will still have a piece of bread and cup of wine given to them with the reminder that "Jesus is here for you right now." What a blessing!

As you do this, remember that ultimately faith is not primarily a rational thing. Faith is a matter of the heart at least as much, if not more, than it is a head thing. That means that once you have decided what God is calling you to share and how God wants you to articulate what God is up to, eventually the work of preaching requires that you find ways that touch people at an emotional level. A sermon without significant emotional content is almost certainly a weaker sermon as a result. There is the very real risk that without emotional/incarnational content it may not be a sermon at all but more of a lecture. We've all done it from time to time. In spite of our best efforts most of us will probably do it again sometime in the future. But paying attention to authentic narratives and being aware of emotional dimensions of preaching will minimize this risk. Do your head work but do the heart work too.

Once you have attended to these things, you can pay more attention to the specifics of the sermon. Constructing a sermon is an act of using language to create a reality for those who will be listening. Be sure you can articulate a clear theme that has God as the subject and active, present tense verbs as the vehicles by which you communicate that God acts. Then, as you construct your sermon, be alert to the language you use as you prepare it. Keep God as the primary actor for the sermon. Craft the language and metaphors you



use for law and gospel carefully, Use a variety of verbs and present tense images as you decide what you will provide to help people “see” and not just hear about the truths you are sharing.

Finally, remember that the more you add voices and share the message with others, the more impact and authenticity your sermons will likely have. This came last in the flow of this book, but it may be the thing that requires you to plan ahead the most. If the sermon will use stories or involve interviews that include others and you decide that you want to invite them to be the ones who speak and share, you can’t generally call them on Saturday evening and see if they are available and willing to do it. You have to plan ahead and help those who are to speak prepare. Though it may take more work and involve some risk to invite others to tell their stories, please hear strong encouragement for you to try this and do it more frequently over time. One way for the Bible to come to life and seem relevant and authoritative in peoples’ lives is for people to hear and see how meaningful and authoritative it is in the lives of other people, especially people they know, love and respect.

Nothing is more likely to help someone see the Bible as bearing witness to a living Word than to discover that the Bible actually is the source and norm of that living Word for others. People often learn by envy, hoping to find ways to have what they see in others. Your sermons can provide a platform for stories to be told, lives to be shared, and Christ to be visible and present in and through the people in the pews as we share the pulpit with them.

So as we finish this piece, yes, there is a crisis of biblical illiteracy in our church. And no, it will not be quickly changed with a few quick fixes that result in people becoming biblically literate and feeling drawn to read their Bibles. This is a long-term endeavor that may take another decade of hard work in order to make even measurable gains.

The premise of this book should remind all of us who preach that our work is important. If our preaching is as effective as it can be, people who are drawn in by the messages we share will want to have a Bible of their own that is well worn, marked up and in which they spend a meaningful amount of time. For some it will mean having to recharge their e-reader more frequently than before or adding a Bible reading app to their phone. If our

preaching is as effective as it can be, people who hear us preach will likely have the best chance of believing that Christ is risen and at work in their lives. There are no guarantees in this work though. Faith is a mystery. But at the same time, the Holy Spirit promises to use the words of Scripture and the words we proclaim to make faith happen and to stir people to spread further the seeds of faith in their daily lives.

So do what you do, do it as well as you can and watch. God will surely do what God does – and even more than we may imagine!

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> From “Will the ELCA Be Gone in Thirty Years?” by Dwight Zschiele, The Faith+Leader web site by Luther Seminary, September 5, 2019. <https://faithlead.luthersem.edu/decline/>

<sup>2</sup> From the *Book of Faith* web site, “About the Initiative – the Challenge.” <http://www.bookoffaith.org/about.html>

<sup>3</sup> From the *Book of Faith* web site, “About the Initiative - Background.” <http://www.bookoffaith.org/about.html>

<sup>4</sup> From *Rise: Bold Strategies to Transform Your Church* by Cally Parkinson. NavPress, 2015, p. 17. Kindle Edition.

<sup>5</sup> Comments made by Cally Parkinson at the “Pan-Lutheran Large Church Pastor’s Conference,” Lake Geneva, WI. September 27-28, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> From “The Bible is Not a Book of Answers” by Jeffrey Poor. Published at the *Relevant* magazine web site, November 5, 2019. (<https://relevantmagazine.com/culture/the-bible-is-not-a-book-of-answers/>)

<sup>7</sup> *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, Revised and Updated by Paul Scott Wilson. Abingdon Press, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> From “Concerning the Order of Public Worship” by Martin Luther, in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, edited by Timothy F. Lull. Augsburg Fortress, 1989, p. 445.

<sup>9</sup> From “Cranach Painting Reveals Luther’s Understanding of the Bible and the Art of Preaching” by Martin Junge. The Lutheran World Federation web site, Blog post for January 5, 2019. (<https://www.lutheranworld.org/blog/cranach-painting-reveals-luthers-understanding-bible-and-art-preaching>)

<sup>10</sup> From *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Copyright SCM Press, 1959. Touchstone Edition, 1995, p. 43.

<sup>11</sup> Comments made by Paul Scott Wilson during the workshop “Missional Preaching,” York, PA, October 18, 2019.

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<sup>13</sup> From *Dogmatics in Outline* by Karl Barth. Harper & Row, Publishers, 1959. p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> From *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* by Francis Spufford. HarperOne, 2013. p. 19. Kindle Edition.

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**Dave Daubert** is a second career pastor (previously an engineer) who has served in congregational, synodical and churchwide ministry positions. He has a Doctor of Ministry in Preaching and a Doctor of Philosophy in Theological Studies.

Today he leads Day 8 Strategies, which works with congregations, judicatories and other organizations throughout the United States and Canada. He is recognized as a leader in the fields of church renewal, leadership, strategy and stewardship. You can find more about Day 8 Strategies by visiting the web site at [www.Day8Strategies.com](http://www.Day8Strategies.com) for more information and for access to books and resources from Dave.

He is a frequent keynote speaker, trainer and workshop presenter. His books include *Discipleship Guides for Lutherans*, *The Invitational Christian*, *Meta-Moments*, *Lutheran Trump Cards*, *Living Lutheran*, *Reclaiming the 'V' Word*, and *Seeing Through New Eyes* as well as several articles appearing in *Net Results*, *Emphasis*, *The Lutheran*, and others publications. He has been interviewed on NPR.

In addition, he is pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Elgin, IL where he lives and shares work with his wife Marlene (a social worker and rostered deacon at Zion Lutheran Church). They have a dog (Elsa), two grown children (Erin and Nathan), and have just welcomed their first grandchild (Gabby) into their family.



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