

A Paradigm for  
21<sup>st</sup> Century  
Lutheran Preachers

Wisconsin Lutheran  
Seminary  
Symposium on Preaching  
September 22-23, 2014

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On the streets of Jerusalem – the city of David, the home of the temple, the place of Passover and Pentecost celebrations – the Spirit brought life to the Church. This same Spirit who once breathed the breath of life into Adam, came ten days after the second Adam had ascended victoriously into heaven. He came with what seemed to be tongues of fire. The Counselor offered the gift of speaking in other tongues. And he came accompanied by a sound like a violent wind. When all the God-fearing Jews who were there in Jerusalem heard that sound, the Bible says they “came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken... Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, ‘What does this mean?’” (Acts 2:6,12)?

By the same Holy Spirit, Peter knew what it meant. Peter also knew what it meant for his audience. Sure, they were from scattered places all over Asia, Africa and Europe, but they were God-fearing Jews who knew their Bibles, who were proud to be descendants of Abraham and who were looking forward to the coming of the Messiah, the Son of David. So the one who made the confession on which the Church would be built stood up and with a loud voice preached from the prophet Joel and quoted King David and pointed to the Christ. “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36).

These Jewish people on the streets of their holy city, who were gathered for a Jewish festival, who heard a Jewish fisherman preach about the one who is the King of the Jews, got it. “Brothers, what shall we do?” was their question. The answer? “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). And that day, 3,000 did and were!

Now jump forward fifteen chapters and some 20 years to the Apostle Paul on the streets of Athens – the city of philosophers and poets, the home of Mars Hill, the place where idol worship littered the landscape. Here was a spiritual smorgasbord where truth was relative and the average person wouldn’t know Adam from an apple. On a hill named after one of the gods, Paul sees the people passing by searching for some spiritual meaning. He is disturbed by the culture and “distressed to see that the city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16). The poets and philosophers along with the Stoics and spokesmen for the culture ridiculed him, deconstructing this preacher as nothing but a “babbler.” So Paul stood up and preached, “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you” (Acts 17:22-23). The culture was so pluralistic that the only thing they could agree on was that you couldn’t know anything for sure.

By the Holy Spirit though, Paul knew. He also knew what it meant for his audience. So Paul engaged the people by quoting the very poets and philosophers who spoke for their culture. He started with what they all knew, the natural knowledge of God found in creation and providence; then moved to what they had a sense of: God’s judgment and justice – all so he could finish telling them about redemption and resurrection in Christ Jesus. Many of those Greeks on the streets of Athens, Greeks who gathered to debate the latest ideas, who were so into the latest trends, “sneered” at Paul. But a few men and at least one woman believed.

Both scenes from this early history of the Christian Church demonstrate an understanding of the context and an engagement of contemporary culture. Each apostle shaped his message from God's Word for the "who, when and where" of his culture. Both apostles shared a message of law and gospel, of sin and grace. Each spoke in a way that could be understood by their hearers without comprising the content of the message and the goal of their message: to proclaim Jesus as Savior and Lord. In doing so, Peter and Paul both provide a paradigm for Lutheran preachers to follow.

One reason I was asked to be on this hill with you today is because I took an online course from this seminary last fall called "Preaching in a Postmodern World." Here is the course description (*it never hurts to quote your professor and the reactor to your presentation*):

In every generation, Satan remixes ancient lies into a new, intoxicating brew. Postmodernism is the brew currently being guzzled by many in our culture. Even those in our pews who have never heard of postmodernism are impacted by it in more ways than they know. While our hearers may not study the culture in which they live and breathe, preachers cannot afford such ignorance. In each generation we must grasp the unique challenges and opportunities the prevailing culture presents to gospel proclamation. *As Lutheran preachers, in this century at this time, our job, our very calling, is to consider insights into how to communicate to those impacted by a postmodern world.*<sup>1</sup> (Emphasis mine.)

That's our focus today as we look for a paradigm for 21<sup>st</sup> century Lutheran preachers. Twenty centuries after Peter proclaimed the Gospel on the streets of Jerusalem and Paul preached on the streets of Athens, the world we live in and the people to whom we preach, are becoming more and more influenced by a post-Christian landscape. In a way, we are moving from an Acts 2 cultural context to an Acts 17 setting; from a world shaped by Christianity to a world that is pushing Christianity farther and farther into the background. As Lutheran preachers, we will want to gain insight in how to speak with such an ever-changing culture in a way that communicates as clearly as possible God's unchanging truth and the Gospel of our Lord and Savior.

### *Remaining balanced*

A word of warning before we begin: we must stay on the Lutheran middle road and remain balanced. We can't tip the scale too far in pursuing cultural relevance alone. Cultural relevance is a tool to reach our audience; gospel proclamation is our goal. When the former becomes the goal, we might just fall to the side of preaching only what itching ears want to hear. From this perspective, you will get sermon titles like, "Five Keys to Financial Peace," "How to Have a Happy Marriage," or "A Three-step Paradigm to Powerful Preaching." That kind of preaching is adopted by many and is appealing in our times, but will not provide what people need to hear: law and gospel; sin and grace.

What Lutheran pastor would do that? No one here certainly, at least intentionally. We realize that kind of preaching doesn't work. So the temptation is to jump on the other side of the scale and reject cultural relevance all together in order to get back to a "pure preaching" of God's Word. But unless your congregation still lives in the 1950s, or 1980s for that matter, you just might be preaching in a monastery-like vacuum that fails to touch people who are influenced by the culture all around them.

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Richard Gurgel, *Preaching in a Postmodern World, Outline: Fall 2013*, p.1.

We don't want to move so far in that direction we don't address the temptations and struggles the people in the pew face while walking in this postmodern world.

Again, think of the Apostle in Athens. There he demonstrated a timeless strategy for preaching that doesn't overreact or under-react. There he gave us an example of how to engage our ever-changing culture in a way that never compromises the never-changing gospel in biblically-faithful preaching. While our postmodern 21<sup>st</sup> century culture is complex, perhaps too complex to ever fully define, three characteristics of this culture present challenges and opportunities to the Lutheran preacher as he tries to balance relevance with faithfulness.

- Postmodern 21<sup>st</sup> Century culture is SKEPTICAL.
- Postmodern 21<sup>st</sup> Century culture is SECULAR.
- Postmodern 21<sup>st</sup> Century culture is STORIED.

An understanding of these characteristics will also provide us with opportunities to connect people to the message that the Holy Spirit uses to breathe Life.

## **Part 1. Postmodern 21<sup>st</sup> Century culture is SKEPTICAL. It asks, "What is truth?"**

After Paul's short stay in Athens, he traveled forty miles down the road to Corinth where he stayed for a year and a half preaching and teaching. After the small success on Mars Hill, would he take a different approach in that context? What would his preaching be like? Here's his description:

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

Again, notice how Paul demonstrates an understanding of the context and culture in which he preached. Corinth was a place where eloquent speakers and skillful debaters were admired and idolized. Patrons even paid a good sum of drachmas if they were impressed. But there in Corinth, Paul purposely chose the exact opposite approach of smooth salesmanship as he shared the Gospel. He didn't try to wow and win his hearers with wise and impressive words. He, in a simple way, simply pointed to "Jesus Christ and him crucified." Why? Why avoid the very approach the context and culture expected and seemed to call for? He knew the power of the Spirit working through the Word to convert and convict those worldly Corinthians. Here's the application for Lutheran preachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and every century for that matter:

“Every man of God in the pulpit should let these five verses of Paul’s letter guide him in his preaching. He should preach the person and the work of Christ; he should preach with a sense of weakness and anxiety; *he must also preach with confidence, knowing that success does not depend on his skill but on the power of God as God’s truth convinces the hearts of those who hear the preacher’s words.*”<sup>2</sup> (Emphasis mine.)

There is a paradigm for Lutheran preaching. As we preach Christ with a sense of our own weakness, we preach knowing God’s Word is truth and that Word is powerful.

But our postmodern world joins a pessimistic Pontius Pilate in asking, “What is truth?” It asks the question because it has been burned too many times. History was supposed to give us all the answers and help us learn from all our mistakes. What we’ve found though, is history repeating itself again and again. Modern science was supposed to give the answers to all the world’s problems. Despite all the scientific, medical and technological advances, those problems have not gone away but seem to have even grown. Those who lead us and make decisions for us have been a big letdown as well. Wars and terrorism, dictators and disease, still rule the day. So postmodernism throws up its hands in despair and shrugs, “What is truth?” The result is a culture where truth is up for grabs. No real knowledge exists on its own. Those in power, whether presidents or politicians or preachers, construct and invent truth to control others. They aren’t necessarily dependable. History can’t be trusted. Science can’t be counted on. So the response is anti-tradition, anti-authority, anti-establishment, anti-language, anti-anything. Divergent. Simply put, postmodernism is **SKEPTICAL** of certainty.

That can be a tough atmosphere in which to preach, especially when we know and proclaim Jesus as the only way, the only TRUTH, and the only life. Guests who are checking us out on Sunday or who have come with a friend, hear you say, “This is what God says.” Their thought might be, “Perhaps.” Our own members are constantly hearing professors, coworkers and the media deconstructing Christian truths and asking some pretty tough questions. Many wonder, “Pastor, how do we know?” **How then do we present Jesus and the Word of God in ways that simply wield the Sword of the Spirit without apology and without compromising strength?**

*Lutheran preachers will avoid an unbalanced approach that can lead us away from the Gospel.*

Again there needs to be a word of warning before we try and answer that question. Cultural relevance is the “who, when, where,” of preaching but proclaiming the Gospel is our goal. Recognizing the balance between the two is vital in our preaching. Tip the scale too far in one direction or another and we risk the Gospel not being heard.

I came across an example of what happens when you throw all your weight on the side of being solely culturally relevant. It comes from an online article on John 14:6 where Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” The online article caught my eye because it is authored by a *Lutheran* preacher promoting a *paradigm* shift in presenting the Gospel (*you’ve got to love the Google search engine*). See what do you think of this approach to proclaiming truth in a skeptical culture.

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<sup>2</sup> Carleton A. Toppe, *The Peoples’ Bible: 1 Corinthians*. (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1987), p.27.

For progressive Christians, this "heaven and hell Christianity" has become untenable, especially in light of our attitudes about other religions. In the old paradigm, the Way, the Truth and the Life is about being "saved." But when we discard this heaven/hell, reward/punishment aspect of being Christian, then we don't have to worry about who's saved and who's not. Our theology shifts and we are free to find the message of liberation and transformation that John has Jesus talking about. We are free to live in the mystery of Truth. We are free to include everyone in each one's understanding of the Way of Wisdom, Sophia, Christ, Logos, Being, Tao.

As a progressive Christian and as one committed to interfaith education and dialogue, I can, with integrity, embrace this text as my own—without allowing it to take on an exclusive interpretation. It may take some time to change the dominant way of thinking about it. But I believe that working to do so is an important part of the challenge of being a progressive Christian in today's interfaith world.<sup>3</sup>

It didn't take long for me to realize, "I am not that kind of a Lutheran." In the name of being "progressive" and focusing on being solely relevant to our culture, that kind of a Lutheran preacher tips the scale to the side of preaching a gospel that is no gospel at all.

*Lutheran preachers will avoid an unbalanced approach which can interfere with the authority of God's Word*

We are "old paradigm" Lutheran preachers, meaning we proclaim the truth of God's Word with authority. But in our quest to do so, is it possible that we are tempted to tip the scale too far to the other side? The danger in a world that rejects authority and is so skeptical of truth, is forgetting the authority of the Word is inherent. When we forget that, we begin to hammer away directly at the issue of authority as if proclaiming an authoritative Word is not enough.

The danger is very real that we confuse preaching the Word with authority with adopting an authoritative preaching style. At those moments we are, often without realizing, shifting the "locus of authority" from the preached Word to the preacher. We don't give Scripture its authority by our stern countenance, the volume of our voice, or how often we point our finger. Authority is not measured by whether I use the second person pronoun as God's spokesman to convict of sin or the first person as I identify with my hearers (inspired authors used plenty of both – often within one sentence!). My task is simply to be willing to say everything the Word says in all the multiple ways Scripture knows to say it – after having let the Word say all of that to my own heart first.<sup>4</sup>

At his ordination, a Lutheran preacher promises to "Preach the Word" (2 Timothy 4:2). The promise isn't to preach some of the Word or certain things that are written in the Word. The promise isn't to pick out certain chief principles or basic thoughts from the Word, and then form a message for our times from these. No, "the task is to preach God's Word just as it is given to us in the Holy Scriptures. This task is based upon the conviction that Jesus is right when he says: "Heaven and earth will pass

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. Susan M. Strouse, D.Min. *Is Jesus the Only Way?* (Patheos.com, <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Jesus-the-Only-Way-Susan-Strouse-07-14-2011>).

<sup>4</sup> Bryan Chappell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing), p.94.

away, but my words will not pass away” (Matthew 24:35 ESV). There is something in this world that is eternal, that doesn’t change like everything else. It is something that isn’t bound and relative like all other thoughts and opinions. It is the Word, God’s Word.”<sup>5</sup>

That takes the pressure off, doesn’t it? A young pastor doesn’t need to point to his Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary diploma hanging on the wall for his message to ring true. The veteran preacher doesn’t have to depend on all his years of experience to sound trustworthy. The days when my German immigrant neighbor would refer to me as “Herr Pastor,” are in the rearview mirror. Nor do we have to persuade or convince or prove. And the last thing we do, is make a demand of the postmodern skeptic, “You better believe it or else.” Remember, he’s anti-authority and anti-truth. He just might be on his way out the door before you ever get to Jesus.

### *Lutheran preachers recognize our authority comes from the power of the Word*

Instead, we preach the Word knowing that it is the power of God, expecting that it will not return empty and trusting that it is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in all righteousness. We can unleash the Sword and let the Spirit cut away. That enables us to say the most challenging things from our pulpits without apology. The same authority lets us speak tenderly without compromising strength. “We preachers are not men without authority. The authority crisis of the pulpit is either imagined, not real, or it is of our own making by our looking for our authority in all the wrong places. When we step into the pulpit armed with the sword of the Spirit which God has given us, we, just like Jesus, come as one having authority: the authority of the Holy Scripture.”<sup>6</sup>

No one here denies the power of the Gospel or thinks in practice that we can make the Word of God more effective on our own. We know that our preaching is a “demonstration of the Spirit’s power.” Otherwise, we wouldn’t be our kind of Lutheran. But that is no excuse to preach boring sermons that become a barrier for our hearers and keep them from seeing their Savior. Nor is it an excuse to preach sermons that don’t at least attempt to connect to the people sitting in the pew. None of us would intentionally do that. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be our kind of Lutheran.

There is no place for sounding authoritarian in the pulpit. Textual, yes. Sincere, yes. Convicted, yes. Honest, yes. But not authoritarian. A deliberate approach in reaching people influenced by a skeptical culture doesn’t prevent preachers from handling the Bible with confidence and expounding the Scriptures as authoritative. It just means remembering that in the postmodern listener’s mind, the authority of the Bible remains up for grabs. But over time, and by the simple proclamation of the truth, the Holy Spirit will lead our hearers to the same confidence he has given us. Our task then is simply to lead them to see the beauty of God’s Word and the truth it contains.

### *Lutheran preachers preach textual sermons*

A paradigm for Lutheran preaching then, is to make sure the pulpit is a place for textual sermons. More and more people know less and less of the beauty of God’s Word. Of course there is going to be

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<sup>5</sup> Bo Giertz, trans. by Rev. Bror Erickson, *A Preacher’s Allegiance to Scripture*, (Concordia Publishing House, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Carl Fickensher II, “The Divine Preaching of Jesus: As One with the Authority of Scripture” in *The Pieper Lectures: Preaching through the Ages* (The Luther Academy, 2004), p.31, as quoted in *Preach the Word*, Vol. 17, No.6, p.2.

skepticism in something people don't know. So let's let them hear and experience what you and I get to dig into every week for a whole week. By God's grace, we have the privilege of mining a text for divine truths. As we experience the Holy Spirit speaking to our hearts we learn what God has to say for his people on that particular week. Climbing into the pulpit on Sunday is the climax of our work, but you've got to admit, the process of getting there is a joyful journey. Part of preaching is letting our hearers in on the joy of what we already discovered. The way we read the text, the textual law and gospel we declare, and the textual language sprinkled into our delivery will all invite others to experience the beauty of that lesson as well. They will recognize that sermon as one which says, "This is what God says," without us even saying it. And they will appreciate that. By the way, perhaps that is a good reason for us to stand behind the pulpit or the ambo when we preach, so people visually see that this man is sharing with us the very Word of God.

### *Lutheran preachers acknowledge those in a skeptic age will struggle*

That means the tone coming from the pulpit in Lutheran churches needs to sound sincere and convicted and honest. Let's be honest about God's Word. Without the discernment of the Spirit, the Gospel of God is foolishness to the wise and weakness to the powerful. We are called to preach the mysteries of Christ and the secret things of God and they will remain mysteries and secrets until the Holy Spirit convicts and converts. Let's be honest with ourselves. By nature, all of us are skeptical of the things we cannot see. Even believers *and preachers*, who are sinners and saints, will struggle with the truth God calls us to believe and do. We do believe but need help overcoming our unbelief.

Let's be honest and open then with those who are following along with us on a Sunday morning. In such a skeptical age Lutheran preachers will continue to proclaim the truth of God's Word, certain that the Holy Spirit will use that word to help overcome unbelief. But let's not overlook that our people do struggle. The pulpit is a safe place. No one will question you publicly in worship. But you can be sure questions pass through people's minds: "The body and blood of Christ are really present. Really?" "Jonah was in the belly of a fish for three days. You are saying that is more than just a fish tale for kids?" We get to wrestle with a lesson for a whole week and wrestle with the challenges it presents. Passing by those challenges in one sentence in a sermon might not be so fair to those who are following along with us on Sunday morning.

For example, how could you quickly pass by this verse in Jesus' debate with the skeptical Sadducees, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven" (Matthew 22:29-30)? "Like the angels in heaven," is going to take some explaining. But can I tell you what I struggle with in that verse? In eternity, I won't be united in marriage to my wife of 20 years and counting. Over the years I have visited with lonely widows who have wondered the same thing, "Will I be together with my husband in heaven?" Here's what is really mindboggling to me, though. Being with Christ in eternity will infinitely surpass even the best of my relationships here on earth. To be his bride is everything. To have him is to lack nothing. If that is what heaven is like, I don't mind not fully understanding it all now.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Thanks to my friend JO who unpacked this struggle for me in a conference sermon he preached. It was a sermon in tune with our culture and provided a unique way to proclaim powerful gospel.



One practical thing that's important, then, is for the preacher to be mindful of biblical assumptions we carry into the pulpit. By the Holy Spirit, the preacher may know with confidence that something is true, and may simply accept it at face value. However, those assumptions should be unpacked from time to time. Acknowledge from time to time in your sermons, "Some of you might be wondering..." Ask when the occasion presents itself, "Is anyone thinking, 'that's impossible?'" Admit, "I have a really hard time with this," when you really do have a hard time with something in Scripture. As you study a text during the week, think of the people who will be sitting in the pew. Anticipate the questions and struggles they will have.<sup>8</sup> Even if your congregation is made up of mostly mature members who don't have those questions and struggles, they may learn to answer their skeptical neighbors' questions and objections. Even the most skeptical postmodern will appreciate your sincerity, your transparency, your patience and your honesty, and they will be more willing to listen.

*Lutheran preachers will want to portray genuineness from the pulpit*

You see, the postmodern skeptic isn't so willing to listen to someone speak *down* to them or *at* them, but they may be more willing to listen to someone preach *to* them and walk *with* them. Read their magazines. Listen to their music. Watch their movies. Meet them in public. Learn about them. Figure out how to connect with them. Before you ever step into the pulpit on Sunday morning, make sure you are stepping into your members' homes. Showing genuine care and concern, asking them about the questions they have, the fears they face and the doubts Satan and our world plant in their hearts, will go a long way in building trust and credibility. That genuine care will win you the right to say the difficult things that need to be said. Your genuine love will win you the right to be heard. Finally, isn't that all we want in this skeptical world, to be heard? We know the Holy Spirit convicts and converts and convinces, so let's wield his sWord because we believe it.

By the way, perhaps that's a reason to take a step or two or three away from the pulpit, or for some of us half way down the aisle. It might give a sense of authenticity and sincerity to our preaching in a way that connects with our hearers. If you are doing it to be hip or cool, don't. Skeptics can smell insincerity a mile away. But walk with them in love beside the road and open the Scriptures to them. Point them to the One those Scriptures proclaim. Who knows? By the power of the Spirit perhaps more than a few will ask each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us" (Luke 24:32)?

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<sup>8</sup> In a past Preach the Word article, Professor Paul Koelpin gave us the acronym SPACEPETS to help us to remember to ask the right kind of questions during our sermon preparation. S – sin to confess; P – prayer to offer; etc. I have started to add another "S" during my sermon study: "S"truggles or difficulties I or my hearers may have. The purpose is to anticipate and address them.

## **Part 2. Postmodern 21<sup>st</sup> Century culture is SECULAR. It asks, “Whatever?”**

What do you think of when you hear the phrase “freedom of religion?” Just ten years ago, you would have defined it as the freedom in our country to pursue and practice whatever religion you desired. Now? For many it’s the idea of wiping any mention of religion *from* the public life.

What do think of when you hear a church is “welcoming?” Friendly, outgoing, mission minded, right? Wrong. That’s an old definition. Now it is code for something altogether different. Now, to be “welcoming” of someone is to be “affirming” of them. To welcome gays as a church means to verify their lifestyle as not only acceptable, but moral. If you do not affirm them, then you are not welcoming of them.

Try the word “tolerant.” If you are looking through the lens of postmodernism, being tolerant means you recognize what someone else believes is legitimate, that you are no more right or wrong than they. AND it means that we must believe whatever someone else believes is valid. So for a Christian to be tolerant of a Muslim is to affirm the validity of Islam.<sup>9</sup>

Words like tolerance, diversity, multicultural, and objectivity are all words that put all ideas, beliefs, cultures and lifestyles not only on equal footing but deserving of respect as well. To put it another way, in postmodern culture right is wrong and wrong is right. And if there is no right or wrong, then we live in an increasing post-Christian culture, or a **SECULAR** culture. Where postmodern skepticism asks: Is it true?, then the secular influence of our culture mocks, “Whatever.” Think teenage sarcasm: “Whatever.” Think confrontational: “I’ll do whatever I want.” Think apathy: “Whatever you say. It doesn’t really matter.”

### **Whatever will the Lutheran pastor do to confront sin in such a sin tolerant world?**

For starters, he will again want to avoid tipping the scale in the direction of trying to be solely culturally relevant. Ignore God’s law, ignore God’s judgment over sin and you’ll end up preaching to felt needs. That’s called relativism.<sup>10</sup> “God is there to make you happy.” *It’s also called idolatry.* But what happens when those “feelings” aren’t there? What happens when life happens and it’s not so happy?

Could this be the reason so many youth are leaving the church at large today? I’ve read statistics which have anywhere from 60% to 90% of young Christians leaving the church after their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Why? Here’s one a paraphrase from a White Horse Inn Radio program: Everything from happening worship, to relevant preaching, to fun nights of fellowship was geared to connect our youth

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<sup>9</sup> You can find these new postmodern definitions for old terms in many resources. One I would recommend would be a blog called, *Church and Change*, by James Emory White. He keeps his pulse on the times and often has good insight to share.

<sup>10</sup> Another effect of relativism in our age is the push to deny guilt as being real. Guilt is to be dismissed. It just keeps you from being happy. So do what you want and don’t feel bad about it. God’s role in all this? He “just wants you to be happy.” I haven’t thought too deeply about this but I wonder how this influences preaching. Often I use the tug of a person’s conscience to aid in law preaching. It is part of the natural knowledge God has given us. Can a culture totally silence that natural law God has placed in the heart? Are there different ways to address the issue of guilt? It is something to think about.

to the church. What we missed though, was connecting youth to Christ. The church has become one giant youth group and so we have grown down instead of up. What do you do when you no longer get that special feeling from the one you love? What happens when life gets tough? You look for love in all the wrong places. If God no longer gives me happy feelings, perhaps I need to look for God somewhere else. The solution that came out of this malady is one Lutheran preachers already know, “What our youth need is catechesis.”<sup>11</sup> What our people need to hear from the pulpit is good solid doctrine. We Lutheran preachers get doctrine. We know Christian living flows out of the foundation of our faith. To get to living right, you have to get the believing right.<sup>12</sup>

The saying is sermonettes are for Christianettes. God’s people, those new to the faith and those rock solid in their faith, need to hear the unsearchable riches of God: creation and redemption, law and gospel, sin and grace, justification and sanctification, Christology and eschatology, heaven and hell.

### *Lutheran preachers will preach hell from the pulpit*

Especially hell, because if they don’t hear the doctrine of hell from Lutheran preachers, they just might not hear it at all.

At some point in the nineteen-sixties, Hell disappeared. No one could say for certain when it happened. First it was there, then it wasn’t. Different people became aware of the disappearance of Hell at different times. Some realized that they had been living for years as though Hell did not exist, without having consciously registered its disappearance. Others realized that they had been behaving, out of habit, as though Hell were still there, though in fact they had ceased to believe in its existence long ago... On the whole, the disappearance of Hell was a great relief, though it brought new problems.<sup>13</sup>

You and I know the problems. Cater to a secular culture by ignoring God’s eternal judgment and you no longer have a holy, holy, holy God who fills the heavens and the earth, who causes prophets to fall to the ground in terror. Ignore God’s justice and our secular world becomes right. There is no right or wrong. Dismiss the doctrine of hell as some artifact of an ancient age, and there is no need of a Savior from sin. Cave in to the secular pressure to avoid speaking of never ending weeping and gnashing, and Jesus is turned into nothing more than a way to Nebraska, the state of “the good life.” You know the problem: the Gospel is lost. For the sake of the Gospel then, Lutheran preachers will preach hell from the pulpit.

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<sup>11</sup> White Horse Inn Radio, Escondido, CA. The show features a regular roundtable discussion of Christian theology and apologetics.

<sup>12</sup> Just because many in our culture are skeptical and secular, let’s not think they are shallow. I think people want to be challenged. They want to know the deeper truths of God. Interviews with the formerly unchurched suggest people are looking for those deeper truths as well. I had a conversation with a young couple at a wedding reception this past summer. They were new Christians who attended the largest church in the Denver area. The lead pastor of that church is a powerful preacher, presenting his message four times a weekend to four thousand in each service. He is a relevant preacher, proving it by dropping f-bomb’s at conferences where he speaks just to show how connected he is. This couple told me they appreciated his personal messages that always seemed to be aimed just at them, admitting they have been brought to tears more than once, thankful the low lights and stadium seating hide their tears from others. They love their new church. They love their pastor’s preaching. Mostly, they love their new Savior and want to hear “something deeper” and promised to check out our preaching someday. I’m hoping the vicar is up that day©.

<sup>13</sup> David Lodge, *Souls and Bodies*, (London: Penguin, 1980), p.113, quoted in *Hell Under Fire*, Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, General Editors (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), p.16.

But may I suggest we do it with tears in our eyes and love in our hearts. God's will is that no one perish, that all come to the knowledge of the truth. Isn't that why we seek to be shepherds? In the Old Testament, God speaks as a jilted lover pleading for his people to return before it is too late. In the New Testament, he is a father longing for his son to return home again. Jesus looked over his city and pleaded, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate" (Matthew 23:37). Yes, there are times God warns with a stern voice, with his righteous voice. But let's explain why he uses that voice – always as a loving call to repentance. Besides, you do realize don't you, each of us falls under the same sentence and each of us walks in the same shoes as those who listen to us? How could any of us dare to preach God's eternal judgment with a triumphant spirit.

May I suggest also that we take advantage of the many ways God's Word provides us in speaking about God's judgment? It is too easy to preach a pat and predictable, "You all deserve hell." We strive each week to preach the Gospel in fresh ways so our people never grow tired of drinking from the well of salvation. Shouldn't we also work to use concepts like desolate, separation, being shut out, weeping and gnashing, and the countless other textual pictures for the law the Bible uses to describe a life without God. Too many times, I'm guessing, my flock even knows the precise moment it's coming in my sermons. Let's speak clearly about hell so there are no imagined Far Side images of nerds wondering if it will be "Hot enough for you." Let's not go overboard with it either, going so far that it seems our whole purpose in preaching is to blast people into hell week after week and scare them into the right kind of living. Let's show in our sermons how much it cost God to love us. Without the doctrine of hell you actually have a less loving God. With it, you have a God who was willing to suffer for you, who is willing to die for you, who even faced hell for you.

### *Lutheran preachers will avoid moralism by addressing the heart of the problem*

While Lutheran preachers don't want to overreact to the secular world we live in by avoiding law preaching in a sin tolerant world, we also will want to avoid overreacting the other way. There is a temptation to react like the religious right and legislate morality. It seems to me, the evangelical right has figured out that doesn't work. At least I don't hear about them very often. Maybe it's just that people tune them out. It doesn't work in politics or in the pulpit. Lutheran preachers who learn at the feet of CFW Walther call that approach to preaching a confusing of law and gospel. We could also call it moralism. That kind of preaching ends up focusing on reforming the outside of the person in the pew when the real problem is deep within.

The problem of the heart in this secular age is deep. How are we going to reach this age of rampant individualism? You know the lingo. YouTube. My Space. MyFitnessPal. Of course there is iPod, iPad, iPhone, iTunes, iMac, and iCal. If you are confident enough, you carry around an iPad mini. We have stared into the mirror of this 21<sup>st</sup> century and become enamored with the person staring back at us. Psychologists call it narcissism. Lutheran preachers know that as idolatry. Did you know Time magazine labeled the Millennial generation as the laziest, most narcissistic generation ever?<sup>14</sup> That's the generation born between roughly 1980 and 2000. They (*yeah, most of you here today*) are the ME generation; the generation of selfies and Facebook posts that so often are a self-promotion of "me,

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<sup>14</sup> Joel Stein, *The ME ME ME Generation*, Time Magazine, (Time Inc., May 20, 2013) p.28.

myself and I.” For you, there is no “I” in team, only ME. Life is about fun. And if there are problems; if there are questions; if they do really need answers; who needs God when you have Google and Siri? If things really get tough, you’ll just move back in with your parents!

Sorry. That’s not fair. My daughter was born in 2000. She is 13 years old and now she is labeled for the rest of her life.<sup>15</sup> Nor is it fair that some of the awesome Christ-like servants in my congregation are labeled lazy. I rejoice seminarians won’t be living with parents but will be speaking with the power of the Gospel from pulpits. There are some here who were part of the hippie generation and now are preaching in Lutheran pulpits! There is at least one head-banger here who listened to Judas Priest before basketball games. I have grandmas in my church who post pictures on Facebook as if it’s a contest to see who has the greatest life and the perfect grandchildren. Whatever! I realize knowing some of the general characteristics of each generation might help us connect with them better. But to label an individual a certain way no matter what their race, their background, etc., doesn’t make sense to me.

My point is: the problem with this secular age is the same problem every generation has had going back to the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve wanted to be like God. Later, Israelites gathered around Mount Sinai wanting to make a god for themselves. The people of Paul’s day on the streets of Athens were no different. Neither are we. We live in an age where people want to be spiritual but not religious. They want to make a god for themselves. The heart of the problem is the heart. No exceptions. And out of the heart come all kinds of things we want to rail against. I’m not saying we shouldn’t talk about sins with an “s”. If a secular culture doesn’t hear what’s right and wrong in God’s eyes from the pulpit, where will they hear it? Movies and music? Schools and Twitter? I don’t think so. What I am saying though, is we will need to preach clear, specific law if we are going to address the problem of the heart. That specific law preaching has to come from the text or it will sound like we are just stepping on the soap box again, preaching against all the ills of society. Every text has a clear specific problem we are powerless to solve on our own. Every lesson points out a malady which surfaces when we look for life in anyone, including ourselves, or anything other than Jesus. A paradigm for Lutheran preachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be to present that malady clearly to Generation X,Y,Z,ME and me; show how we cannot solve it on our own; and show clearly how lost we are unless Christ digs us out of this mess we’ve created.

*Lutheran preachers will avoid moralism by avoiding an “older brother” tone*

It’s important Lutheran preachers don’t sound like the older brother who hates his younger brother when we do preach the Law in this secular age. We cannot be Pharisees preaching against ‘sinners’ or moral police holding rocks while towering over parishioners kneeling in their pews. You know the secular person’s response, “Whatever!” It strikes me how the Apostle often bares all before his people. The former Pharisee is not shy about sharing he was a blasphemer and a violent man. He admitted daily defeats doing the evil he did not want to do and failing the good he wanted to do so badly. He even shares this trustworthy message, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display the unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life” (1 Timothy 1:15,16). The pulpit is not the place for the pastor to bare all, of

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<sup>15</sup> During my final edit, I found out my daughter is no longer part of the Millenials but is now part of Generation Z, making up 13-19 year olds. Great, a 13 year old labeled for life just because she can FaceTime and use emojis👍.

course. Is it possible though, to find ways to demonstrate our own weaknesses and vulnerabilities, to show how we are utterly helpless to solve our own problems and make right our wrongs? Paul doesn't put a front or a façade, while hiding behind a pulpit. We don't have to either. Paul didn't let his past define him. He always allowed God's grace and mercy to shine. We can too. While Paul shared his story, he was never the hero of that story. God's grace in Christ Jesus always was. It should be for us too. I believe a certain amount of vulnerability in our preaching will give us credibility with those who listen. Where we decrease, Christ will increase. That was Paul's goal: "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Timothy 1:17).

We constantly need to work at dividing distinctly between law and gospel and making sure that justification is always the cause and effect of sanctification in our preaching. When we preach Christ and him crucified, we are sharing the Gospel that transforms from the inside out. When we exhort people to moral behavior without rooting it in God's beauty or Christ's grace, we'll end up with sermons that are not that kind of a Lutheran sermon. That kind of sermon won't even be distinguishable from a Mormon message, yet alone a Catholic or a Reformed sermon. That's dangerous in our secular culture which is becoming more and more pluralistic and syncretistic all the time.

*Lutheran preachers recognize pluralism and syncretism is present in this secular age*

Another characteristic of our 21<sup>st</sup> century culture is not just that Christianity is getting pushed farther into the shadows. It is opening the door for other religions to take a more prominent role on the stage. For the people in our pews, this can cause confusion. Listen to Glen Beck's talk show and you will hear the opinionated patriot claim to be Christian while he is a staunch Mormon. Read the tabloids and you'll hear how Tom Cruise is considered a man of faith. In this land of the free, eighty percent of adults claim they are Christian, yet twenty-five percent of adults use their freedom to believe in reincarnation.<sup>16</sup> My basketball coach passed me through college math, but even I can figure out, those numbers don't add up. We live in a pluralistic/syncretistic society where whatever goes. You can't even do Yoga X my brothers without coming across those crazy ohms at the end.

This past summer, a special issue of Time magazine hit the news stand. The entire issue is a potluck of ideas about heaven and the afterlife. When the author, Lisa Miller, asked evangelist Billy Graham whether heaven would be closed to good Jews, Hindus and Buddhists, he balked. "Those are decisions only the Lord will make," Graham answered. "It would be foolish for me to speculate on who will be there and who won't... I believe the love of God is absolute. He said He gave His son for the whole world, and I think He loves everybody regardless of what label they have." A few pages later Miller writes, "When Barack Obama met with evangelical leaders in 2008, endeavoring to convince them of his Christian credentials, Billy Graham's son Franklin (who is not as generous a spirit as his father) asked him a pointed question: 'Do you believe Jesus Christ is the way to God or merely a way?' Obama knew what the stakes were and answered carefully. 'Jesus is the only way for me. I'm not in a position to judge other people.'" <sup>17</sup> A good answer for a politician but not for a Lutheran pastor.

**So how do Lutheran preachers present Jesus as THE WAY and not just one option among many in a world that smirks, "Whatever?"**

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<sup>16</sup> Lisa Miller, *Discovering Heaven*, Time Magazine (Time Inc., July 2014), p.64.

<sup>17</sup> Miller, p.49,50,51.

Again, a thoughtful approach in reaching people influenced by a secular culture doesn't prevent preachers from expounding Jesus as the only way. It just means remembering that in the postmodern listener's mind, anything goes. Our tone in presenting gospel is going to be important then. Claiming directly that Christianity and Lutheranism are superior to all denominations and religions sounds like superiority in the secularly tolerant ear. There are times, of course, when we are called to denounce other messages as false gospels that taste like cotton candy but have the nutritional value of such as well. But more often, the task is less to denounce them and more to show our people how they cannot answer our deepest problem. Let's show how distinctive the Gospel is. Let's make clear that it is by grace you are saved, through faith and not by works. Let's declare boldly that the Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. At the same time, let's make sure to point out that viewing Jesus as just an example or just a prophet or just another teacher is not an option. Lead people to see that he is and has to be THE way, THE truth and THE life. He is our only hope.

*Lutheran preachers have one distinctive thing to offer*

And there it is in a nutshell, the one distinctive thing we have to offer this most secular of worlds: hope. Siri can get me to Heaven's Dragon, a Chinese restaurant just down the street from my church where presidents and politicians have dined. But she can't give me heaven or hope. Our secular world is looking for answers but cannot find them. It is not optimistic about its future. "Whatever," can be a cry of rebellion. "Whatever," might be apathy. But for many it is cry for help. We're not even talking optimism which so many preachers peddle today as the gospel. We are talking about hope, that no matter how bad things get, God's Word and promises will prevail. That hope comes from the cross and the empty tomb of Christ. Think of Paul the preacher again,

"But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:12-20)!

### **Part 3. Postmodern 21<sup>st</sup> Century culture is STORIED. It asks, “What does it look like?”**

The Joslyn art museum in Omaha, Nebraska, possesses one of sixty-nine bronze casts of Edgar Degas' statue, *The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer*. I was privileged to see it when I chaperoned for a seventh and eighth grade field trip. Our guide was proud of the statue, and had every right to be. Another one of the bronze casts had been auctioned off for \$19,000,000, which even raised the eyebrows of a few 12 and 13 year olds. But more than just wanting us to know that this statue was a near priceless work of art, created by a world renown artist in a medium that was unique, our guide wanted us to experience it. She invited us to observe the piece of art from every side and angle, to look at the lines, to take in the beauty of the expression and to experience the movements created by the artist in this three and half foot statue. And those seventh and eighth graders did – in all of about ten seconds.

Lutheran preachers have the priceless work of God to share from our pulpits, and the last thing we want is for people to pass by with a glance and a look. The story of how Christ snatched us away from the grasp of Satan and the curse of hell is something we want our hearers to experience and discover anew each week, to view from every side, and to cherish this gift that God has made our very own through faith in Christ Jesus. The Christian faith certainly involves knowledge of the truth and the certainty that is ours in Christ. That certainty is the *oida* knowledge of which Scripture speaks so often. Scripture also speaks of a *gignosko* knowledge, a knowledge that comes by way of senses, emotions and experiences, that is realized or enacted in relationship with God, with life and with others.

The postmodern world has its' challenges for the Lutheran preacher. It is skeptical and suspicious of truth. It is secular and not so willing to listen to moral absolutes. But it is also a **STORIED** culture shaped by constant communication through texting, Twitter and Facebook. Cable TV and satellite offer 200 channels of picture perfect shows at any moment of any day. Many of those shows invite us to experience real stories in real time. The web is no longer just about information. It's about Web 2.0 interaction. If I want to get caught up on Green Bay Packer news, I can check out the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, the Green Bay Press Gazette, and then click on my FanSided App to have access to four more sources of Packer stories without leaving my desk in Colorado. If you want real news, you can watch MSN or CNN or Fox or even Al Jazeera to pick the story line you want to follow. Twenty-first century America is shaped by visual stories and that means this is a time of opportunity for the Lutheran preacher. People are ripe to hear, to experience and to discover THE story and to come to the knowledge (*epignosis*) of the truth.

The question for us then, is **how might we better reach those who are part of such a storied culture?**

Perhaps it means Lutheran preachers should incorporate more narrative or inductive forms into their preaching. Now before you accuse me of abandoning “the way we’ve always done it,” I’m just encouraging flexibility. In the last issue of Preach the Word, Jay Adams who has written much on preaching, is quoted as saying “[The Apostle] Paul is the example of a healthy flexibility that Christian preaching needs for this hour; a flexibility that enables the preacher to adapt without compromise; to



alter form without changing substance.”<sup>18</sup> But [the Professor] Paul followed that with this caution, “We can still preach propositionally or deductively. Inductive preaching should be in every preacher’s kit bag, and respecting our hearers is a must. But the preacher need not be tentative. The pulpit need not be a democracy. Words still work when they are the divine words of Scripture. If we are indeed saying what the Lord says, then we can still say, ‘Thus saith the Lord.’ And the Lord’s Word will not return void.”<sup>19</sup>

### *Advantages and disadvantages of deductive preaching*

Deductive sermons have their advantages. The preacher makes the major point of the sermon near the beginning and then develops the point. Directness and clarity are major strengths of that kind of preaching, especially when the truth of God’s Word is at stake in our skeptical, secular, anything goes, kind of world. A deductive approach will help our congregation move from a major point it already knows and asserts as true, to deeper implications for the truth and for life. Lutheran preachers need to know how to preach in such a way. Our pastors are served well by a Seminary that teaches deductive preaching as a foundation to proclaiming God’s Word in truth and with faithfulness. Vicars who have served alongside me come into our congregation as good preachers. They become even better preachers over the year – and not because I teach them all kinds of inductive methods. Their sermons are still deductive. I think they grow in preaching because they get to know people on a personal level and they enjoy proclaiming the beauty of the gospel to the people they love. Please understand, “how” we say things is the emphasis of this section. The most important thing, however, will always be the “what” we say.

But think of strict deductive preaching from “my” perspective for a moment as someone who is influenced by my 21<sup>st</sup> century culture. If you state the proposition of your sermon right at the beginning, you are assuming that I accept your right and authority to state such a claim. Remember, I am anti-authority. If you share a viewpoint with me that I disagree with before you start, I might simply stop listening. Remember, my philosophy is “whatever.” In its strictest sense, your deductive preaching allows me no room for struggle, no room for me to contribute. You have asked me to be a passive listener. If I am on your team, it is only to catch your splitters in the dirt. Even less complicated than all that, since I know the direction of your sermon already at the start, your sermon runs the risk of being predictable and dull. Remember, I am part of a storied culture, so I am used to suspense and tension and getting involved. “My” perspective, of course, might be exaggerated, but you get the point. There is room for the flexibility narrative/inductive preaching provides.

### *Advantages and disadvantages of narrative/inductive preaching*

Now, those who know the intricacies of narrative preaching versus inductive preaching could give you the specifics of each. For our sake, this morning, I am going to lump the two together. When you think narrative/inductive preaching then, think storytelling; think question and answer; think Lowry’s Loop<sup>20</sup> or problem resolution preaching. All those kinds of preaching can be advantages in a storied culture because they provide a way to create tension. The congregation recognizes an unresolved

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<sup>18</sup> Jay Adams, *Audience Adaptations in the Sermons and Speeches of Paul*, (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker, 1976) p.68.

<sup>19</sup> Professor Paul Koelpin, *Preach the Word*, (Waukesha, WI; WELS Commission on Worship; Vol.17, No.6) p.2.

<sup>20</sup> If you are not familiar with Lowry’s Loop, here’s a simple description: it follows a line of discovery... of a problem (Oops) and what that means (Ugh!) to its solution (Aha!) to a celebration of what that means (Yeah!).

problem in understanding a biblical text, a doctrine or practice, or situation, and seeks to discover how these tensions can be resolved. Of course, it goes without saying, Lutheran pastors will make sure the discovery is rooted always – always – in Christ.

Narrative/inductive preaching also can be a good way to approach a text that is familiar to your people. Not too long ago I had a dear member say she's heard the Christmas story a thousand times. "Every time I hear it," she said, "I fall asleep." Christmas? Really? Perhaps a little tension is needed next Christmas Eve. Narrative/inductive preaching can also be a good approach if a text addresses a difficult teaching with which you know people will struggle ahead of time. A sermon exploring and discovering the blessings of marriage done God's way might be a better approach to addressing same-sex marriage than a sermon that starts out, "Same sex marriage is an abomination to God."

Not that there aren't dangers to narrative or inductive preaching. If you jump too far to the side of narrative preaching you might make the mistake of reducing our preaching to next to nothing. If the goal focuses on sharing stories that help us feel good about our "Jesus-and-me" relationship, usually through a heavy dose of emotional appeal and practical application, there barely is consideration of the textual truth involved. And if you take a narrative or inductive approach in your sermon to help your hearers discover the answer to a malady they face, then you better make sure you lead them to the right resolution in Christ, because too many in this secular age will come up with the wrong answers. Our postmodern world may be anti-propositional, but this is a reason for Lutheran pastors, especially in narrative sermons, to make sure they always have a clear proposition in mind. You know the 3 A.M. rule, don't you? The purpose or proposition or goal of your sermon has to be so clearly defined that if I woke you up at 3 A.M. Sunday morning, and asked you what it is, you could rattle it off on the spot. During your sermon, keep it hidden. Save it for the end. Surprise people by pointing to it when they least expect it. But make sure it is clear. Without that clear goal, a narrative or inductive sermon will be ramblings without a point and stories without an end. At worst, people won't know the point God is making for their lives.

### *Narrative/inductive sermons can be uniquely textual*

It's best then, vital then, that all our sermons be textual. I think narrative/inductive preaching gives us opportunities to make connections to the text that involve more than just, "Who wrote this?" "When?" "Why?" "To whom?" "What's the application?" The Bible itself tells a pretty good story. Narrative/inductive sermons provide us with unique ways to reflect the structure and mood of the story to be told as well. Obviously a historical narrative text lends itself well to a narrative sermon. Prophecy, poetry and parables can provide us with a variety of ways to structure a sermon. Even epistles can be used to do the same. If you received a letter, for example, from someone in prison what tone would you expect? Well Paul gives us an unexpected one in his letter to the Philippians: joy! There is a story there. Narratives give us ways to capture the mood of a text in ways a declaratory sermon can't. The joy, anger, fear, failure, hopefulness or celebration, or the movement from one to another, can be captured and conveyed in a narrative/inductive sermon that allows the hearer to identify with the tone Scripture uses and with the people who experience them. For example, there were shepherd keeping watch over their flocks at night. Suddenly they were terrified, and you would be too. A moment later they are running to Bethlehem with joy, and you would be too. There is a story there. Even our tone of voice and the expressions on our face and the body language we display give textual insight in narrative preaching. In other words, the text should control you rather than your temperament. The different sections of Scripture aren't always forceful or always affectionate or

always admonishing or always encouraging. Our sermons shouldn't always sound the same either. Simeon's "a sword will pierce your own soul too," spoken to Mary will sound a whole lot different than the Baptizer's address to the Pharisees, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" (Luke 2:35, 3:7) "Every text is an opportunity to preach on a truth of God's Word, but not in a distilled, conceptual manner summarized out of the Lutheran Confessions or Pieper. Rather, we make use of the text's literary and rhetorical fullness to address the whole person before us in intellectual, emotional, physical ways so that the people's faith holds stronger to the inspired revelation of Christ."<sup>21</sup>

### *Narrative/inductive sermons help with biblical illiteracy*

Not only does narrative/inductive preaching provide us with rich ways to proclaim a particular text, it also gives Lutheran preachers ways to show how that particular story from God's Word is really just a part of the grand story or what's called the metanarrative of the Bible.

That's important in this secular age, when the babel of postmodernity betrays a growing biblical illiteracy. President Mark Schroeder, in his bible study for the Interactive Faith Online Bible Study Series presented earlier this year backs up that statement: "Polls indicate that more Americans than ever before identify themselves as church-goers while, simultaneously, the rate of biblical illiteracy has never been higher. In the mainline Christian churches the situation is almost dismal." (*It never hurts to quote the synod president and because he has a lot of input on where some of you will be preaching next year at this time, we, who are part of a skeptic culture will just assume he is correct.*)

Greek *logi* and Latin *verba*, might impress fellow seminarians in chapel or hold sway over our brothers at pastors' conferences, but are going to be meaningless Greek on Sunday mornings. We've done well in our circles to remind each other to define biblical jargon and not to assume everyone in our pews knows Noah's ark is more than a cute children's story about a grandpa and grandma who like animals or an ecofriendly movie about preserving the earth. It will also be important for us to explain how all this biblical jargon and biblical stories fit into God's entire plan of salvation.<sup>22</sup>

Again, there is a danger of moralizing if we don't show how they fit. I had the privilege of teaching a junior doctrine course the last two years at our local area Lutheran high school. Those juniors grew up on Veggie Tale. They knew songs about Shack, Rack and Benny along with Dave and the Giant Pickle by heart. But if they don't see how those stories fit into the story of God's love in Christ, they will only know those characterizations of the Bible as isolated lessons of morality – which is what Veggie Tales is (*or practical advice on where to find your hairbrush*).

“By approaching the Bible as a complete book written by a common theme and witness rather than happenstance collection of independent and often irreconcilable parts, preachers can better help their people enter the biblical drama.”<sup>23</sup> This mega drama is the story of creation – the fall – redemption –

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<sup>21</sup> Glenn Nielsen, *Preaching Doctrine in a Postmodern Age*, Concordia Journal, (St. Louis, MO; January 2001), p.23.

<sup>22</sup> Here is an example of a failure to do exactly what the paragraph warns against. A good friend caught this phrase and warned: “whenever I hear anyone use the word "salvation" I always wonder if that was a lazy sentence. The word means everything and the word means nothing. At very least, "salvation" in Scripture is commonly one of three things: 1) Christ's work, 2) rescue from a present crisis, or 3) final deliverance in heaven.” Thanks TJ.

<sup>23</sup> David Lose, *Preaching At The Crossroads – How the World – And Our Preaching – Is Changing*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013) p.55.

and recreation. It's the grand narrative that shows us how God created Adam out of dirt, called the dry dusty bones of Israel to life, brought Lazarus out of the grave and will do the same for us when the trumpet blasts on the last day, all because Christ himself was victorious at the cross and empty tomb of Easter.

The grand story of the Bible makes Christianity the story that explains all other stories because every single part of it points to Christ. Narrative preaching then, will always – always – be Christ-centered preaching. These are the Scriptures that testify about him. “He is Lord of all, and therefore He is the Lord of the Scriptures too. From Moses to the prophets, He is the focus of every single word of the Bible. Every verse of Scripture finds its fulfillment in Him and every story in the Bible begins and ends with Him. That is what our people need to understand – that the Bible is not just a compendium of god short stories, but a grand, life-encompassing metanarrative of God’s Work of redemption of the world.”<sup>24</sup> I hope I am preaching to the choir here – that you realize we are not always preaching to the choir on Sunday mornings.<sup>25</sup>

### *Narrative/inductive preaching provides unique ways to apply God’s Word*

Lutheran preachers know the key question, “What does this mean?” But our people are asking another question narrative preaching can help answer, “What does it mean for me?” People want to know, “What difference will all this make?” Here’s a question I ask during my sermon study, “What does it – whatever the proposition is - look like in the Christian life?” If many in our secular age don’t know what the Bible means or what Christ means, then how are they going to know what difference it makes in their marriages, at work or in school, with friends and family and every other area of life. Again, Lutheran pastors get justification and sanctification. We know the Gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes and that same Gospel is the power for a godly life. We know God’s Law doesn’t just convict the sinner, it guides the saint. We understand the priesthood of all believers and the doctrine of vocation. So our people need us to model it for them in our sermons. One way to do that is through stories.

We usually refer to these stories as illustrations. On the short drive between churches in a dual parish I served, the lead pastor and I would have just enough time to catch Father Youngblood’s weekly joke at the beginning of his homily, a joke that rarely had anything to do with the message of the day. Even in deductive sermons, illustrations have a bigger role than just entertaining or keeping people’s attention. Lutheran preachers use them to help people comprehend what was said, to help them “see” in their mind a truth that was told. But in narrative/inductive preaching, illustrations have a bigger role. There, the goal of the illustration is to engage the entire hearer, to lead him or her to discover and experience what the truth of God’s Word will look like in their lives. In other words, application.

Perhaps this is the place to speak about PowerPoint-less. The temptation is to use them like an illustration. We think they bring some high tech and high powered aspect to our sermons. But many

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<sup>24</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2008) p.95.

<sup>25</sup> I am so thankful for the work that went into our own Planning Christian Worship and for the effort to connect readings from week to week. I think series preaching within the pericope is important because it shows how the lessons from week to week all fit together and how it fits together in Christ. A *lectio continua* from an epistle is easy: The Christian Faith, One Word at a Time in Romans. Seasonal series make sense too: The Disappearance of Death / Hell / Heaven/ by Christ the King in End Times. Look for connections from week to week as you do your worship planning and you may be helping your people see how all these lessons fit into the big picture.

times the purpose of our slideshows is just to entertain or keep our hearers from getting bored. If you think about it, PowerPoint is just an upscale version of an overhead projector and I haven't seen one of those used since my senior year at the seminary. In an essay entitled, *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint*, Edward R Tufte of Yale University, argues that the templates of PowerPoint actually "weaken verbal and spatial reasoning." He speculates the inner workings of PowerPoint want to make you conform to its way of thinking. PowerPoint wants the user, you, to think in bulleted lists. It wants titles for slides.<sup>26</sup> That sounds more like an aid for deductive sermons. Finally, don't you want people listening to you and the message you proclaim? Credibility, care and concern heard in your voice and witnessed in your body language, will be blurry at best if your flock is focusing on a screen of words and patterns and distracting backgrounds behind you. Luther once said, the nature of the word is to be heard. Preaching is about proclamation of the good news. My suggestion is to be cautious in slideshows during your sermon. At the very least, remember, less is more.

The goal of a narrative/inductive application is a transformative event (remember, from the inside out). So paint a picture with words. Show how God's grace changed someone's viewpoint or action. Use lessons from your own life (remember, you are never the hero but God's grace always is). Take a contemporary story that parallels the biblical story in the text and compare the two.<sup>27</sup> Find ways to show your members the difference the power of the Gospel will make in their everyday lives as well as what it means for eternity.

By the way, this is a good place to talk about the advantages of using images in a PowerPoint or showing a YouTube clip or a short phrase or quote to create tension or show the power of the Gospel in someone's life. For the most part, the world no longer revolves around words, but images. Storytelling may allow you to proclaim the word in a way that connects with people's right brain. But, for many of us, an image here and there can really help. For younger people, images shown during a sermon may connect with how they experience the world. At most though, remember, less is more. After all, it's the story of Christ that matters.

We are story people. We know narratives, not ideas. Our surrogate parents were the TV and the VCR, and we can spew out entertainment trivia at the drop of a hat. We treat our ennui with stories, more and more stories, because they're the only things that make sense; when the external stories fail, we make a story of our own lives. You wonder why we're so self-destructive, but we're looking for the one story with staying power, the destruction and redemption of our lives. That's to your advantage: you have the best redemption story on the market...

A story needs a story teller, and it is the church alone that tells the story of salvation. Here in the church is where the cities of Man and God meet, and that is why all the real spiritual battles, the most exciting adventure stories, begin here. We know that death will continue to break our hearts and our bodies, but it's not the end of the story. Because of all the stories competing for our attention, the story of the City of God is the only one worth living, and dying, for.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Edward R. Tufte, (Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 2006), quoted by Philip A. Quanbeck, *PowerPoint in Preaching, No!*, a handout from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary online course, *Preaching in a Postmodern World*.

<sup>27</sup> Some of us preached this way when we adapted Pastor Jon Schroeder's Christmas sermon that paralleled the Gift of Christmas with a gift a prisoner of war received in the novel *Broken*. Again the hero of the story has to be Christ Jesus but it's another example of narrative preaching that creates tension and the process of discovery.

<sup>28</sup> Sarah Hinlicky, "Talking to Generation X," *First Things*, (February 1999) p.11, quoted by Nielsen.

The author is wondering how to communicate with my generation. Except for the VCR reference though, doesn't it fit all of us in this storied age? In this time, in this place, Lutheran preachers are presented with a wonderful opportunity. We have the old, old story, which is worth living and dying for, to present in fresh ways to people for whom Jesus lived and died and rose. The old wine is ours to share, perhaps in new wine skins.

### *In closing*

Please understand, I am not I am an authority on postmodern culture in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nor have I mastered the art of preaching. In prepping for this time with you today, I have discovered this pursuit of a paradigm for Lutheran preaching at this time and in this place, will keep me an endless student and hopefully, always humble. I pray it's the same for you.

Please understand too, that we all have different gifts and abilities. For some of us, deductive preaching is what works for us. Others of us are natural at narrative preaching. Some of us are gifted speakers. Others portray a compassion for souls that lets us get away with preaching that is not as polished. God doesn't ask us to be something we are not. He simply calls us to be faithful with the First Article gifts he's given us and preach the Word he promises to bless.

Please understand the context of our ministries varies from place to place. I have preached in churches in a rural town called Mobridge and the Midwestern city of Omaha, and now the Mile High City suburbs where mile high is more than altitude these days and Colorado is the second most unchurched state in the country. The stories told there are different just as they would be if you are preaching in the Bible Belt or in the shadows of Brigham Young University or on a college campus or at a senior living center. No matter where Lutheran preachers preach though, we preach to people who need to hear convicting law and comforting gospel, who need to know they are but strangers here and heaven is their home through faith in the One who dwelt among us so we might live with Him.

Please understand too, the culture of these places will shift with the times. Postmodernism replaced modernism. Now I hear we are in a "late postmodern period" moving into "Post-postmodernism" or "metamodernism." Who can keep up with these shifting shadows? Does that mean this paper is already outdated? In such a searching world, Lutheran preachers preach the One who is the same yesterday, today and forever, who entered our time that we might be with him in eternity.

Finally, please understand, what we are called do from the ambo is not a right, but a privilege. More than that – it is a gift of grace in Christ Jesus our Lord. When we climb into the pulpit, we do so covered in the righteousness of the Perfect Preacher who offers the perfect prayer as our Great High Priest:

*"My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me in to the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified."*

John 17:15-19

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*A good many other articles influenced my direction. If you want those, you will have to take Professor Gurgel's Growing in Grace class, "Preaching in a Postmodern Word," or contact me and I can find a way to share.*

Thank you to my father, my bishop and my president. You modeled the importance of preparation, love for people and a love for the Word.

Thank you to my circuit brothers. Our discussions of preaching have been a great benefit to me.

Thank you to my co-workers who have spent their vicar year with me. I received so much more from your sermons than I gave to you. Remember, “Do as I say and not as I do.”

Thank you to my “Preaching in a Postmodern World” online classmates. I appreciated your constant reminders of the importance of law/gospel, Christ-centered preaching. I’m guessing not many church bodies have such a good thing.

Thank you to those who have been willing to sit in the pew all these years and listen to me. The only reason why you would do such a thing is gracefulness flowing from the grace of God.

Finally, thanks be to Christ, *Via et Veritas et Vita*.