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God Sends His Love



by Scott Hoezee

If ever you needed an example of the fact that preaching is, finally, a deep mystery, you need look no further than the very first sermon ever preached in the Christian Church. It was the Day

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of Pentecost, and the Church as we now know it was maybe all of ten minutes old when the disciple Simon Peter stood up to deliver a sermon. I suppose it says something about the place of preaching in Christianity that a sermon was about the first thing that happened as soon the Holy Spirit got cut loose on believers. But it says something even more profound about preaching itself that *Peter* was the one to deliver that first sermon.

In one fell swoop Peter went from a knock-kneed, feet-of-clay, untutored fisherman (who had only recently denied Jesus three times) to the boldest gospel herald of them all. Some 3,000 people became Christians on account of Peter's proclamation. And if *that* doesn't tell you that preaching is a mystery, I don't know what would! Just think of the shyest person you know—somebody who is scared of his own shadow, someone who blushes a deep crimson if he has to talk to more than two people at a time—and then imagine *that* person suddenly standing up and preaching like Billy Graham and Rick Warren put together. If you can imagine such a thing, you have an idea of how shocking it was that Simon Peter, of all people, stood up, opened his mouth, and proclaimed the gospel!

Preaching is a mystery. Indeed, you need not read very deeply into books about preaching before you encounter sentiments like this one from the renowned preacher Ian Pitt-Watson: "I don't understand preaching, but I believe in it deeply." Most people who write books on homiletics or the theory of preaching express similar sentiments. If you punch in the keyword "preaching" on Amazon.com, you will be shown a list of just over 81,000 books that have something or other to do with sermons and with the preaching craft.

Still, for all that avalanche of words, the es-

sence of preaching very nearly defies description. Anyone who has spent much time writing and delivering sermons will admit that preaching is a profoundly odd activity. Talk to almost any preacher, and you will hear similar stories. Speaking for myself, I know that there were Sundays when I strode into the pulpit with enthusiasm because the sermon that week came together beautifully, and I was pumped up over its content. But then, after delivering the message, I just knew it had not quite connected. My enthusiasm for that particular sermon did not prove to be contagious!

Conversely, there were those weeks when the sermon came together in agonizing fashion. The words just would not come. When my wife came home from work, she could tell at a glance that I had not had a good day of sermon-writing (and so she knew she'd find a better conversation partner that evening in the dog than in me). Of course, even those sermons get written somehow, but you bring them into the pulpit with a heavy sense that this is just going to bomb. And then . . . then, midway through delivering the sermon, you just know as a preacher that the congregation is with you in a way you cannot explain. You can hear the proverbial pin drop. There is an electric current flowing between the pulpit and the pews. Something eventful is happening. And at the narthex door following the service, people with tear-brimmed eyes thank you for that sermon. "It was just what I needed to hear," some will whisper in voices choked with emotion.

As a preacher, you are left to wonder, "What happened here?" But something similar takes place almost every week. People come out of church to thank you for things you were not aware you had said. And then you realize anew that every sermon is not a solo but a duet. The preacher's voice is not the only one sounding in the sanctuary. By the grace of a very loving God, the Holy Spirit "sings" the sermon with the preacher, and that Spirit's harmonies can croon truths into people's ears that go beyond what the preacher outwardly says.

Preaching is a mystery. Having written and delivered well over 1,000 sermons since I was ordained sixteen years ago, I testify to that mystery. Like most people who write about preaching, therefore, I admit up front how little I truly know

about it. But like all those professors who don't let that ignorance stop them from writing whole books on the subject, I will forge ahead to spend some time wondering together with you about two main things: first, what is a sermon? Second, if you are someone who listens to sermons, what do you have a right to expect from preaching?

First, then, what is a sermon? Since coming onto the faculty at Calvin Theological Seminary, one of the new experiences I've had is serving on a panel to hear oral comprehensive exams from our senior students as they prepare to graduate and enter the ministry. One question that I like to ask is, "Tell me what a sermon is. What makes a sermon different from any other form of communication you could name? Why is a sermon different from an adult education lesson or from a classroom lecture?" I like that question. What I have not liked so much are the answers I have received. Especially in a seminary setting where almost all of the professors are also ordained pastors, it seems difficult for some students to figure out what difference exists, if any, between a classroom lecture on Exodus 10 and a sermon on Exodus 10 delivered in church.

Surely the difference has to be more substantial than pointing out that the sermon might have more illustrations in it than a classroom lecture would have. Surely the difference has to be more significant than the idea that a lecture might be more content-heavy than a sermon. Surely the difference is more interesting than to note that the audience might sing a hymn after a sermon but not after a lecture. I would even allege that the difference needs to be more substantive than the fact that a sermon is delivered under the authority of the elders, whereas a classroom lecture is not.

Let me take a stab at a rather dense-sounding definition of a sermon and then spend a few minutes unpacking some of that density. **A sermon is a word from the Lord rooted in Holy Scripture and proclaimed by a preacher anointed for this task. The sermon is delivered to a congregation gathered for public worship in the context of which Christ Jesus himself is present and active by his Holy Spirit in order to thicken the faith of believers and to quicken others to come to faith for the first time.**

Again, that definition is rather dense, so let me briefly try to break out of that definition the key components. First, a sermon is a word from the Lord rooted in Holy Scripture. Once upon a time, preachers were more willing to say “Thus saith the Lord” than they typically are today. Some preachers today treat the sermon as a kind of extended time of sharing, as an open exchange of ideas with which members of the congregation are free to disagree or agree as each sees fit.

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In fact, the latest development in homiletics is what some call “the roundtable pulpit,” in which preachers are told that the only legitimate way to write a sermon is to do so by committee. The preacher gathers together a representative sample of the congregation and then lets those people name the subjects they want to see addressed (and how they want them talked about, too). We want today to have the people write the sermon because that’s the only way—or so some preachers seem to think—that those same people will accept the sermon as authentic. The sermon cannot come from the preacher to the people but has to come from the people to the people. We’ve switched from “Thus saith the Lord” to “So say we all.”

But for a sermon to be authentic, the preacher must be willing to say that the core of what gets proclaimed really is a word from the Lord. And the only way any preacher should dare to assert so bold a claim is if the sermon is rooted in Scripture. When the preacher says what God says and when the preacher faithfully tries to apply God’s Word to contemporary circumstances, the preacher need have no shyness about invoking divine authority.

Of course, it may still be that there are legitimate points of discussion and even disagreement

on the precise interpretation of a given passage. And it may be that honest Christians of goodwill could have differing ideas on what it may mean to apply Scripture to this or that aspect of life in the modern world. In other words, no preacher should claim that *every* word and detail of the sermon is as inspired and so as reliable as the Bible itself.

But when a sermon proclaims the truth that Jesus is Lord, that the Spirit lives in us, that sins are forgiven, that Jesus is coming again to make all things new, and other such recognizably huge teachings of the Bible, it really is the case that the sermon represents a reliable word from the Lord. And when that is so, one can claim of a sermon “Thus saith the Lord” in such a way that members of the congregation are not, as a matter of fact, free to disagree with it.

In short, for a sermon to be a sermon, it must be rooted in God’s revelation to us in the Bible. Because of that fact, I myself am a little leery of the contemporary tendency to have sermon series that promote “Six Ways to Grow Your Business” or “Five Ways to Enhance Your Marriage” because I just don’t find many biblical texts that seem really interested in such how-to tips for success. But that could be a topic for a much longer presentation than this one is meant to be!

We need to move onto the next part of the definition of a sermon: namely, that it is proclaimed by a person anointed to do this particular task. When we ordain someone to be a pastor, we authorize that person to perform any number of ministry activities. Perhaps the most visible such activity will be preaching God’s Word. When we ordain someone, we do not say that this person is better than or superior to or more important than any other member of the congregation. What we do thereby say is that we value preaching sufficiently as to set someone aside to do this. We recognize that this person has certain necessary gifts, and we then clear space in the life of the Church for this person to exercise those gifts. Having an educated and specifically ordained clergy is the Church’s way of saying that although the Lord can and does speak through lots of different people in the Church, we believe that preaching is a sufficiently special moment as to warrant letting someone take a lot of time to pray about it and then work really hard at it.

Preaching is, as we've been saying all morning, finally a mystery, but it takes nothing away from that mystery to note that good preaching is also the result of a lot of good old-fashioned hard work. But we believe in that work sufficiently as to give designated persons the time, the space, and the permission to think, to study, to read, to reflect, yes, to stare off into space for long periods while certain insights gestate and mature in the mind and heart of the preacher. We need that preacher to be the intersection point of heaven and earth, to be the focal point at which the concerns of the congregation are brought into dialogue with the truths of God's Scripture. And so we anoint designated persons to do this.

Time again does not permit us to linger here long, but let me toss this out for your further reflection: I believe that we live in a time when the Word of God needs to be proclaimed clearly and boldly in our churches. I believe that in this word-saturated culture of non-stop talk on TV, of blogs and emails and instant messages without end, in this setting the one Word of God needs to be heard above all others. And so I believe that now more than ever we as believers must want to see our pastors holed up in their studies for significant stretches of time every single week.

Probably few of us would disagree with that in theory. In practice, though, we are putting far too many demands on our preachers, requiring of them a welter of activities that keep them from having or taking the time needed for solid reflection and study. Or, we let it slide when our pastor makes of himself or herself a holy blur of activity. We say to each other how wonderful it is that the pastor comes to every Bible study, all the youth activities, all the basketball games at the Christian high school and middle school, and so on. And then we wonder why on altogether too many weeks the sermon seemed as if it were not quite finished, as if it were a cake that was still doughy in the center because it had just not been in the oven long enough.

Today more than ever the congregation—particularly through its appointed leaders—needs to protect a preacher's study time. If the preacher seems unwilling to spend the time necessary in favor of other activities, this pastor needs to be chal-

lenged. And if the congregation's demands are interfering with study time, the preacher needs to know that he or she will be taken seriously and not derided as a bad pastor if and when he or she laments this lack of time to the Elders.

Authentic preaching comes from those anointed and set aside for that task. Let's make sure those people have the space to realize the reality for which they were ordained in the first place.

Finally, we come to the setting of the sermon. In our definition we said that the proper setting is the congregation gathered for worship in whose midst Christ himself is present and active, thickening faith and planting the seed of faith. Why might worship be so important in terms of differentiating the sermon from, say, a classroom lecture at seminary or even a Sunday school class after the service?

Sometimes at Calvin Seminary when I teach a preaching class in which a student delivers a sermon in the classroom, we note together how artificial this setting is and how it makes it hard to deliver the message. Some students seem to think that what makes the classroom setting artificial is the fact that his fellow students are all sitting there, getting ready to discuss and critique the sermon the moment the student is finished. But having preached hundreds of times in church, I can assure you that a person doesn't need to be in a seminary class to sense that the people in the audience are potential sermon critics!

No, the main difference between preaching a sermon in class on Thursday afternoon and preaching a sermon on Sunday morning in the pulpit is that on Sundays, the people are gathered for worship. What does that mean? It means they were called there by God's Spirit. We Christians worship a God in Trinity, a three-personed God who is within even his very Self a community of persons. There are lots of reasons why it makes no sense for someone to say, "Yes, I am a Christian but I never go to church. I don't need church. It's just me and Jesus." No, when people worship a God who has forever existed as a zestful and effervescent community of sharing and love and life, they cannot bear that God's image and be a lone ranger. Our triune God calls us into community.

People gathered for worship are there because

they were called together. They were invited by God's Spirit to come. What's more, they have come together to worship, to display to God and before God their joy and gratitude at all the gifts God has given them in creation and in redemption. We received our life in creation and our renewed life in salvation, both as a result of grace. Both just came to us without our asking! Worship is a time to celebrate creation grace and redemption grace.

In short, when God's people gather for worship, they do so drenched by grace. The very act of worship serves as a sign that we dwell in the presence of God, that we do not serve a God who is distant, remote, or aloof from our experience. We serve a God who is with us, always, to the end of the ages, and who can therefore be readily approached by his gathered people. Now, of course, we realize that as people of Pentecost, we are, each one of us, a living temple of God. We are never out of God's presence and so never beyond the reach of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit can and does move in classrooms and lecture halls, at symphony orchestra concerts and public performances of Handel's *Messiah*. We cannot say that the Spirit is active only in worship services.

What we can say, however, is that the Spirit is active in a unique way in worship services. And because that is so, the sermon delivered in that setting becomes itself a sign and seal of grace. The sermon becomes the place where God encounters his people to instruct them, reassure them, or even convert them. Couldn't God do that in some other way? Does God *need* a sermon to do all that? I suppose He does, but it's not up to us to question God's way of working. Just as we are not free to dispense with baptism in favor of some other kind of ceremony, and just as it's not up to us to substitute an antipasti platter and lemonade for the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, so also it's not up to us to say that we don't need a sermon for God to instruct us, shape us, mold us.

God has chosen to meet us through the sermon. The Word preached is, in its own way, a means of grace, and so in preparing that sermon for God's people, the preacher needs to have the humble yet awesome expectation that the Lord is going to move through this message to do a new thing. That new thing will go well beyond the imparting

of information. By God's Spirit the sermon will address each listener in the entirety of his or her being. The Spirit will engage the mind but also the heart, the earthly as well as the spiritual, the things that matter most now and the things that point us toward the eternity of God's kingdom. As such, and as noted earlier, this means that the Spirit (who is the universe's premiere multi-tasker) will join his voice to the preacher's voice in that duet of sound that will help to tailor that one sermon for each listener.

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All of that makes the sermon one of the most potentially fruitful forms of communication that anyone could ever imagine. By the Spirit, each paragraph, each sentence, even each word draws not a single straight line between the pulpit and the congregation but hundreds of lines from the pulpit to each person, each line being potentially a little different from all the others as the Lord God himself applies Scripture to the people who have gathered so very hungry to get just that word from God that they needed. They get the word needed to keep them plugging away a little longer on that long journey of discipleship that winds and wends its way through an often difficult and challenging world.

I suppose that all of that asks the other question posed a bit ago; namely, what do listeners have a right to expect from a sermon? It goes without saying that however I answer this question poses lots of implications for those of us who write and deliver sermons. People have the right to expect preaching to be eventful. They have the right to

expect that something will happen, that God will speak, that new insights will come, that hope and grace will be proclaimed as alive and valid and true. They have the right to expect Jesus to show up in the sermon to show them yet again the holes in his hands and feet as a reminder that he died for us all and that the kingdom of God is truly at hand.

People have a right to expect such things. That means that those of us who preach have a sacred obligation not to be boring. We have an obligation to think deeply and broadly and well about the things of the faith. We have an obligation to be a pioneer listener of the biblical text, to spend our weeks out ahead of the congregation in scouting out an area of the biblical landscape, watchful for what's gorgeous, dangerous, intriguing about that text and then, come Sunday, to share, eagerly and enthusiastically, some of what we discovered with the people who don't always have the luxury of being able to spend that kind of time in the Bible. Preachers have an obligation to do what most sane people cannot do and don't want to do; namely, we think about preaching *all the time!* When we go to the movies, when we read a novel, when we watch a documentary on television, when we observe humanity at the beach or at the mall—in all that we do—we keep looking for insights, illustrations, applications, and ideas that will help God's Word apply to and fit into the real world in which we all spend our Mondays through Saturdays.

Some while back I talked to several people who lamented the sermons they were hearing in their congregation. As telling as anything they relayed to me was the fact that everyone in the congregation knew that their pastor's number-one source for sermon illustrations was "The Family Altar," the *Today* daily devotional booklet put out by The Back to God Hour. Never mind that most of the congregation were reading those devotionals on their own every week anyway; the fact that this preacher did not or could not look any more widely or deeply into the workaday realities of this world displayed a tragic underlying attitude in this preacher that even he frankly did not expect much to happen in his sermons.

Preaching is mystery. Who can understand it fully? Perhaps no one. But we don't have to com-

prehend it to live as grateful beneficiaries of it because as in the sacraments, so in the Word preached: God chooses to work in this way. There may be no more powerful a testimony to that divine activity than the fact that after 2,000 years, after over 104,000 Sundays have come and gone, after untold billions of sermons have been preached (the vast majority of which were probably not stellar), even so, every single Sunday people all over the world flood into church sanctuaries hungry, eager, ready to be fed. And each week, yes, even in those less-than-stellar sermons, God speaks. There is very little on the human side of things that could explain the endurance of preaching, and at any number of points in history there were those who predicted its demise. Some today still do this by predicting that drama, videos, and other more modern forms of communication will soon eclipse what some deride as that most boring spectacle of just having one person drone on for 20 or 30 minutes.

I know, however, that preaching will never die, will never be replaced, will never be eclipsed; and I know it because in the sermon, Jesus shows up. Jesus shows up, and he's made clear in history that he likes showing up in that way. Preaching is a divine activity, and, as I said near the outset, all preachers sooner or later sense the power of the Spirit in ways that go beyond the preacher's own skill. I was tempted to say that the sermon "takes on a life of its own." But that would be wrong: the sermon does not take on a life of its own; it takes on the life of the living Savior, who shines forth from that sermon. It is because of that Savior that I know preaching has a bright future.

The narrator of Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Gilead* is an Iowa preacher named Rev. John Ames. Rev. Ames is nearing the end of his life, and *Gilead* is his extended memoir written in the form of a letter to Rev. Ames' young son. As Rev. Ames prepares to die, the one thought that keeps coming back into his mind again and again is what will become of all his old sermons. They are stored in many boxes in the parsonage's attic, and Rev. Ames cannot figure out if he should do something with them before he dies, or if he should just let someone else figure that out after he's gone, or if he should leave written instructions in his will as to what to do with that lifetime's worth of work.

Rev. Ames knows full well that old sermons in a box are not the same thing as a living sermon that comes across in the moment of delivery. Still, he cannot shut out of his mind that those sermons represent something significant. Yes, some of the older sermons in that collection might embarrass

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him now. There were some he'd now deem naïve, wrong on certain points maybe, a bit out of date no doubt. Maybe they would mean nothing to anyone except him alone. Maybe.

The last mention of those sermons is in about the fourth-to-the-last paragraph of the novel when Rev. Ames writes to his son, "I'll just ask your

mother to have those old sermons of mine burned. The deacons could arrange it. There are enough to make a good fire. I'm thinking here of hot dogs and marshmallows, something to celebrate the first snow. Of course, your mother can set aside any she might want to keep, but I don't want her to waste much effort on them. They mattered or they didn't and that's the end of it."

Ah, but thanks be to God, that's not the end of it. In the deep mystery that is preaching, God preserves his people through the craft of the Word proclaimed. He does so because in every sermon that is true to God's Word, the message comes through: God sends his love. Few people ever tire of reading love letters. Few people who are in love ever grow weary of the chance to spend time with their beloved just talking. And so each week as God's people worshipfully gather under the overarching embrace of his gospel grace in Christ Jesus the Lord, God sends his love. Small wonder, then, that we as the people of God have never yet grown weary of listening! God sends his love. Praise him! Amen.