

Worship and the Word
January 29, 2012 Epiphany 4B
Mark 1:21-28
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Whether we know it or not, there are words of Scripture that shape our worship service from beginning to end. When we greet one another, the leader says, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” And you respond, “And also with you.” Now, somebody didn’t just make that up. It’s from 2 Corinthians 13. During the hymn of praise we sing, “Glory to God in highest, and peace to God’s people on earth.” Somebody didn’t just make that up. It’s from Luke 2—the song of the angels sung when Jesus is born. When we gather around the communion table we say, “On the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it.” That’s from 1 Corinthians 11. When we share the benediction, we say, “The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you...” That’s from Numbers 6. I could go on and on. Pretty much everything we do in worship, including the hymns and the anthems and the sermon, has some sort of connection to the Bible.

Today we continue with our sermon series on *Creating a Place for All to Worship*. I want to spend the remainder of my time focusing specifically on how the Bible shows up in our preaching. *In seminary, Lutherans pastors are taught to use a biblical text as the basis for our sermon.* We might thoroughly explore the text one week and barely allude to it the next, but there’s always supposed to be some sort of biblical word behind what we’re trying to say. We’re not just making this stuff up.

The focus on a specific text is one of the main differences between Lutherans and Evangelicals. Evangelicals are more likely to start with a theme, a theme such as, “How to Deepen Your Prayer Life.” Then they pick-and-choose biblical passages that support that theme. I’m not suggesting that they’re wrong and we’re right. I’m just saying that we’re different.

So why do Lutherans tend to focus on one text at a time? Is it because we’re not as good at multi-tasking as Evangelicals? No. But I can think of a couple of reasons. One, it’s a pattern that seems to stem from our use of the lectionary. The lectionary, in case you didn’t know, are the assigned Scripture readings that we use in worship. The

Scripture readings follow the church year. Year after year, we tell the story of Jesus: from his birth and baptism, to his call of disciples, to his journey to Jerusalem, to his death and resurrection, to the sending of the Spirit, to the work of the church. Because our preaching tells this story over and over again, we naturally gravitate toward those texts that best help us do this—and those are often the gospel for the day.

A second reason for focusing on one text at a time: Jesus seems to have done something along this line when he preached in the synagogue. We get a hint of it in today's gospel. It's the Sabbath. Jesus is a good Jew. He goes to the local synagogue in Capernaum for worship. While he's there, he spends time teaching and preaching. Our story doesn't say that they read Scripture together, but we know that that's what happened in the synagogues.

We see this practice spelled out more completely in Luke 4. Again, it's the Sabbath. Jesus is back in the synagogue. When it comes time for him to preach, he unrolls the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He starts to read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." After the reading is finished, Jesus rolls the scroll back up. And he begins his sermon. It's short and to the point: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And all the jaws on the faces of those in the room drop open.

Whatever else this story might say to us, it says that Jesus used a biblical text as the basis for his sermon. We preachers aren't supposed to stand up in the pulpit and simply spout our opinions. We're supposed to preach from a text. In fact, a preacher's job is to go to the text on behalf of the congregation. That's what you call us to do. It's called Word and Sacrament Ministry. That doesn't mean we're smarter or braver than anybody else. That doesn't mean you shouldn't read the Text Message before worship and do some studying too. It just means that our primary job is to read and study Scripture, to wrestle with it, to struggle with it, to be convicted by it, and—much like Jesus—to be prepared to share a word of truth with the people.

Besides reading and studying the text, another task of the preacher is to read and study the context. There's an old adage at seminary that says: "The best way to prepare

for a sermon is with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other.” We preachers need to know the context. We need to know the culture. We need to watch more TV (okay, that might be a stretch). Most importantly of all, we need to know the congregation. As we get to know the people, we lift up their thoughts and concerns in our sermons. One of the reasons we share stories about people in our sermons, stories which—by the way—we always share with permission, is because these stories are a way to contextualize the message. And hopefully they allow what we’re saying to hit home.

Jesus certainly knew his context. He was constantly telling stories about farmers and fishermen, about widows and tax collectors. He wanted to connect with people. When Jesus came to the synagogue that day in Capernaum, there was a man with an unclean spirit. From my vantage point, I’m not sure what an unclean spirit it. In Jesus’ time, an unclean spirit might have been something that we would diagnose as a mental illness, perhaps even epilepsy. But Jesus wasn’t living in our time. Jesus dealt with the illness in his context. He spoke a word to the spirit: “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the man was healed. My point is, when you’re doing ministry, context is everything.

The context was important on our recent trip to Tanzania. On Sunday we attended worship at the Lutheran church near Iambi Hospital. The church was alive and well, packed full of worshippers. There were two texts for the sermon that day: the story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee, where Jesus gets invited into a home and eventually saves the day by turning water into wine; and a passage from Ephesians 5, where husbands are told to love their wives, just as Christ loved the church. The message of the sermon, as it was translated to me, went like this: “Husbands, you need to invite Jesus into your home. Husbands, you should have only one wife. And you should not beat her.” Now, if I had been a guest preacher that day, I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t have come up with that theme. Then again, I don’t know the context. My hunch is that that message was critically important for those who had come to worship that Sunday in Tanzania.

So, by of reminder, we start with the text. We look at the context. And then we wait. We wait for a word to speak to the congregation. Believe me, it’s much better if that word comes on Thursday morning than—say—Saturday night at 10:30. We read and study, we wrestle and pray, and we wait for God to give us something significant to say. After all, the preacher doesn’t just repeat the biblical story. We’re always interpreting it.

We're always listening for a fresh word, a living word. We operate on the assumption that God still speaks and it's our job to set forth possibilities of what God is trying to say to us. Finally, when that word does come, whether it's Thursday morning or Saturday night, the preacher engages in something similar to what the women did after they'd gone to the tomb that first Easter morning. Do you remember the story? The women go to the tomb. They find it empty. They aren't exactly sure what to believe. Then they return to the others and give testimony to what they have seen and heard.

I like that image for preaching: giving testimony. It seems fitting for our day, a day in which we're not exactly certain about many of the issues we're facing. Testimony is less about truth with a capital "T" and more about a confession of faith. It's less about certitude and more about heartfelt conviction. It involves a preacher going to a text and a context, and then saying, "This is what I've seen and heard. This is what I hear God saying. This is what I think God is doing. Let's talk about it." Again, we're not as certain about some of the issues we're facing today...war and hell and Muslims and homosexuality and marriage amendments...and sadly, many of these issues can completely polarize us as a church. Hopefully, testimony gives us a chance to talk about these issues with conviction, but yet not close the door to well-meaning Christians who might think differently than we do.

Let me give you an example. When the war in Iraq was imminent, I found myself increasingly troubled by it. I felt we hadn't given diplomacy enough time. I wasn't convinced there were weapons of mass destruction. I did some reading on the Just War tradition, and I came to believe that the situation did not justify our invasion of another nation. So...I stuck my neck out...in the pulpit. I said what I thought, but I was careful to do it a way that was respectful of those who might think differently. As I met people at the door, the comments were overwhelming positive. Obviously many people agreed with me. But those weren't the comments that stuck with me. The comments that stuck with me were the six to eight people who came out of church saying something like this: "I didn't agree with what you said...but I appreciated the way you said it."

That is testimony. All we can do as preachers is to tell you what we have seen and heard. Finally you as listeners have to finish the sermon. On any given Sunday, you might be on the edge of your seat or you might be bored to tears, but it's your job to

decide what God's claim upon your life will mean for you in the coming week; it's your job to take God's word to heart.

That day in Capernaum, the crowds were astounded at Jesus teaching, because he spoke with authority. I believe Jesus' words have that same power for us today. They have the power to heal a broken man. They have the power to convict a troubled conscience. They have the power to calm our deepest fears. They have the power to bring hope when the world around us seems to be falling apart.

What is this, a new teaching? Yes. Or maybe better, it's an old teaching, spoken in a new way. It's the power of the word. It's a power meant to create faith in your heart and mine, and to give us the strength we need for the journey. Amen