

A Method of Sermon Preparation

The title “A Method of Sermon Preparation” suggests that this is one of many. It is the method that I use and teach. I trust it to work. For the purpose of this course, you need to demonstrate proficiency with this method before you dismiss, modify, or abandon it.

“FOUNDATIONS OF A HOMILETIC METHOD”

I Foundation of a Method of Preaching is the Goal or Purpose of Preaching

- a) For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 1 Corinthians 1:22-24
- b) The goal of Christian preaching is to preach Christ crucified. To preach Christ crucified is to raise the dead; that is, to bring people from death to new life.
 - i) So many other issues, topics, agendas, and concerns want to be preached, or perhaps preachers and their hearers want sermons to be about so many things besides Christ crucified. Congregational concerns, social issues, global situations, and life’s questions all need to be addressed in preaching, and they should be. Following Jesus’ own example as a preacher, we learn that every issue is fair game for preaching; no topic is out of bounds. To say otherwise is to conclude that there are areas of life where Jesus has no place.
 - ii) The problem with addressing anything and everything from the pulpit comes when the way issues and topics are included and addressed in sermons is not appropriate to Christian preaching. Since we preach Christ crucified, the issue is what Jesus or God has to say.
 - (1) Every issue and topic that gets included in a sermon must be grounded in and related to the biblical story of God’s work of reconciliation, particularly the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
 - (2) I wholeheartedly agree with venerable preachers like Gardner C. Taylor, who I once heard remark that the gospel has not been preached until the gospel is connected to the issues and concerns of the people hearing the sermon. Some preachers, congregations, issues, and topics demand that the connection between sermon content and gospel proclamation be stronger and more explicit than others. When people cannot miss the relationship between even the most difficult or controversial issue or sensitive topic and the gospel, when the connection is inescapable, when they are convinced that God has something important to say, preachers and congregants may well feel uncomfortable, but most will listen as God

speaks to and through them (Craig A. Satterlee, *When God Speaks through Worship*).

- c) To preach Christ crucified, to move people from death to new life, is not to get the Gospel said but to get the Gospel *heard*.

II Foundation of a Method of Preaching is Embracing Method a Means of Working with the Holy Spirit

- a) How do Preachers Get the Gospel Heard so that People Move from Death to New Life?

- b) Can there be a Method to Preaching?

- a) Method is a friend and not a constraint.

- i) Surgeons and Pilots use methods; they don't just "try something."

- ii) A method, an orderly way of proceeding, guarantees some result.

- iii) Every preacher has a method.

- b) The Holy Spirit works through a homiletic method. A method of sermon preparation can be (and is for me) a spiritual discipline or a form of prayer that is sacramental.

2) Foundation of a Method of Preaching is a Theology of Revelation. How does God communicate Godself to humanity?

- a) God's communication of Godself to humanity is through events, in time and space; that is, according to the way that we can receive and understand.

- b) Events are neutral; they demand interpretation.

- i) Event: A wedding. How would the bride's interpretation compare to the caterer's?

- ii) Event: Creation. Interpretation: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows God's handiwork" (Psalm 19:1)

- iii) Event: Crossing the Red Sea. Interpretation: *Jerusalem Evening Press*, "God Liberates God's People" vs. *Aswan Evening Herald*, "Slave Labor Force Escapes"

- c) The community gives the interpretation of the event. An event in time and space

always gives rise to a story and that story is “slanted” according to the community of interpretation.

- i) The critical stories of a people gradually get written down and become scripted. Thus, what we have in scripture are the scripted stories of the events of God.
- ii) Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, LXVII (c. 155): “And on the day called Sunday there is a meeting in one place of those who live in cities or the country, and the memories of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the president in a discourse urges and invites [us] to the imitation of these noble things.”
- iii) The common memory of the Christian community needs to be kept alive to ensure the Christian community’s ongoing history. Thus, the stories are written down (Scriptures).

A METHOD OF SERMON PREPARATION

SCRIPTURE	EVENT >	STORY >	SCRIPT OR SCRIPTURE
SERMON PREPARATION	READ AND STUDY SCRIPTURE >	RETELL THE STORY >	PROCLAIM THE EVENT

I Overview of the Process

- a) Move from how God is communicating with us in the events of the Bible to how God is communicating with us here and now in the events of the world in which we live.
- b) We understand scripture not as presenting things that happened long ago and far away but as presenting models or paradigms or prototypes of how God has dealt with God’s people and is dealing with God’s people. For God is faithful in dealing with God’s people.
- c) Thus, we identify the event that is taking place in biblical time and the event that is taking place in our world.
- d) Four-Step Process: Ponder, Order, Create, Proclaim

II Ponder: Read and study Scripture. *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” Colossians 3:16.*

- a) Read scripture in “uncluttered space”—peace, quiet, solitude. Read over and over; let scripture work on you. Don’t run to the commentaries!

- b) Tell the story, as if to a 6 year-old. Stay as close to the language of scripture as possible but translate biblical and theological concepts into the language of experience. What is grace?
 - c) Study scripture: Methods of Exegesis.
 - d) Try out possibilities: How is the event present to us in our time? What's going on in the liturgy, congregation, community and world?
 - i) Incubation. Sermons are prepared in slow-cookers and not microwaves. Recognize times when insights bubble up unexpectedly and be prepared for them. "Ah-ha!" Moments: shower, falling asleep, long walks
 - ii) Now check the commentary as a "conversation partner"
 - e) Pondering results in lots of insights, lots of information, lots of images.
- III Order: Determine the central idea or focus of the sermon. Light Mist in Pulpit = Heavy Fog in Pew
- a) One and only one insight. Preachers can't talk about everything in every sermon. Different parts of *Kerygma* are emphasized at different times.
 - b) At this point many preachers are given to pause or even find themselves stalled because they are not positive what to say. While God may occasionally speak so loudly and clearly that the preacher has no doubt about what needs to be said and heard, most often, determining the central message of the sermon is a matter of deliberation and decision.
 - c) The goal when determining the message of the sermon is to formulate a "purpose statement" or a "focus statement."
 - i) I like to think of the focus statement as a beacon or lighthouse that shines on everything—content, form, and style of delivery—the preacher considers including in the sermon. As a general rule, if the beacon is enhanced or reflected by whatever the preacher is considering, it is appropriate to the sermon; if the beacon is diminished or obscured, it is not.
 - ii) Focus Statement: "single sentence that summarizes the thrust of the sermon" (Ronald Allen)
 - (1) Simple sentence that includes a subject, action verb, and predicate.
 - (2) Good news from God concerning God's love for the world and God's will for justice in the world (Ronald Allen).

- (a) The subject is normally God.
 - (i) Research indicates that people seem at times desperate to hear about God and people are not hearing all they want to know about God from the pulpit. (Mulligan and Allen, *Make the Word Come Alive: Lessons from Laity*, Chalice, 2005)
 - (ii) People want to know who God is, what God is like, and then how God expects us to live or behave.
 - (b) The verb is usually an activity of God.
 - (c) The predicate is usually a benefit or consequence of God's love and justice.
 - (d) The tone is ordinarily positive, hopeful, and encouraging.
- (3) The focus statement is always a declaration of good news.
- (a) I join David Bartlett and many others in contending “that preaching is always good news. Preaching is news; it is fresh, involving, surprising. It is not the repetition of tired formulas or one more self-serving plug for [some] program. . . . It is always the herald=s announcement of God=s victory.”
 - (b) The gospel is “the news (revealed through Israel and confirmed for the church through Jesus Christ) of the promise of God’s unconditional love for each and every created entity and the call of God for justice (that is relationships of love and abundance) for each and for all.” Ronald J. Allen, “Preaching as Mutual Critical Correlation through Conversation.”
 - (c) The gospel is the good news “that God’s love, confirmed in Jesus Christ, is freely, graciously, offered to each and all, and . . . that we are to love God with our whole selves and to love and do justice to our neighbors as ourselves.” Jana Childers (ed.), Purposes of Preaching (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), p. 10.
 - (d) For Thomas Troeger, good news means that we “preach not answers but the living Christ.@ According to Troeger, preaching the living Christ means proclaiming resurrection as more than the once-a-year theme of Easter. Christ=s resurrection opens astonishing possibilities when we give up the delusion that we control reality. Resurrection is the vital ministry that results when a church releases its obsession with doing things as they always have; resurrection is the future that opens to a

society when it comes to terms with its prejudice and injustice. Resurrection is the vision of Christ that is granted us when we release the images we cling to in order to preserve what we hold dear and to feel secure.”

- (e) The good news is appropriate to the congregation. The preacher’s task is to decide what about the Gospel is new and good for the congregation in its situation.
 - (i) In order to speak to the community of faith, the preacher is aware of all who make up the congregation.
 - (ii) Some congregations may need to hear more about the freedom of the Gospel and other congregations may need to hear more about responsible living under the Gospel. But the preacher’s task is always to discover and proclaim the Gospel. Even when the congregation falls under the indictment of the law, the focus statement seeks to show how the Gospel empowers the congregation to move beyond its limitations.

IV Create: Give form to focus. The goal of preaching is not to get the Gospel *said* but to get the Gospel *heard*.

- a) There is no single form for a sermon: central image, story/narrative, binary oppositions, siding against the text.
- b) There are essential characteristics of the form.
 - i) **Good News** - Name with equal vigor Sin and Grace, Cross and Resurrection, Law and Gospel, judgment and mercy, then fall on the side of Grace. Convict the hearers of their sin but then convince them of God’s grace. We need both sides of the coin. Moment of Deliverance. Mitchell: “fiery madness vs. fiery gladness”
 - ii) **Biblical** - The sermon connects the biblical world of “there and then” to our world of “here and now.” There are different ways of doing this. Ask what God is doing in the text: humanity is not the star of scripture. Preach Christ Jesus: explicit Gospel statement. What difference does it make that Jesus lived, died, and rose? Do not presume the Gospel!
 - iii) **Applicable to Today and to Real Life** – Ground preaching in pastoral visitation. Be careful to use insights gained as part of pastoral visitation in ways that respect confidentiality.
 - iv) **In the Language of the Hearers** - Explain theological language. Better yet,

avoid it. Use stories and examples.

- v) **Missional** - Lead the hearers to *do something in the coming week*. Sermons have a life span of one week.

(1) Exhortation flows from the proclamation of the Gospel. Preaching attempts to open people to God before it attempts to get people to do anything else. “In some theological traditions, openness is regarded as the one thing human beings have to offer God; in others, God supplies even this. . . . To preach Jesus Christ is to allow God’s word to work through one’s personality and expressiveness in such a way that both preacher and congregation are opened.” Jana Childers, “Seeing Jesus: Preaching As Incarnational Act,” Jana Childers (ed.), *Purposes of Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), p. 1.

(2) Stated another way, preaching disrupts life to create a space in which the Holy Spirit can work, a space in which the community can rethink, revisit priorities, or receive. Mary Donovan Turner, “Disrupting a Ruptured World,” Childers, *Purposes of Preaching*, p. 135.

- vi) **Integral to the Liturgy** - Leaves the hearers with a *eucharistic attitude*: “I want to give God thanks and praise.” This is distinct from “I want to feel good.”

- c) Write out a manuscript; it provides distance.

- i) Gerard Sloyan, *Worshipful Preaching*: “If the manuscript is your enemy, don’t let it get near the pulpit; but if you don’t write one, don’t let yourself get near the pulpit.”
- ii) Check to see that the manuscript is in oral English rather than literary style. Ask, “Do I talk this way?”

V Proclaim: “*Eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.*” *Ezekiel 3:1*

- a) Decide on the method of delivering this sermon and do it well.

- i) “Sometimes it is best to speak from the heart. Sometimes it is best to speak from a prepared text. And sometimes the best way to speak from the heart is from a prepared text.”
- ii) “Do you require students to preach from memory? You should! Preaching is not reading to us! I’m so sick of being read to! Tell the students that proclaiming the Gospel means talking to us!”

- b) Practice the sermon so that it goes from being a written document to a proclaimed event.
 - i) **Authentic** - Hearers must trust the preacher. In the pulpit this is established through nonverbal communication in first 45-60 seconds. Out of the pulpit trust is affected by the preacher's lifestyle and relationship to the hearers.
 - ii) **Respect for the Hearers** - The hearers are understood as participants in preaching and preachers are to respond to their participation. Speak *for* as well as *to*.
 - iii) **Urgent** - The Gospel is a matter of Life and Death!
 - iv) **Powerful** – Full of Power. The message is a Word sent by God in which everyone participates. The preacher speaks that Word and the hearers listen to that Word. By their participation in the sermon, the assembly makes an offering to God.