

proclaiming the living word

A HANDBOOK
FOR PREACHERS

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We acclaim the living Word, Jesus Christ, present in the gospel reading. Preaching brings God's word of law and gospel into our time and place to awaken and nourish faith.

*Evangelical Lutheran Worship,
"Pattern for Worship"¹*

Preface

This little book is intended as both a grateful encouragement and a concrete help for the Christian preacher. I hope that it might call the preacher again to courage, confidence, and even gladness in the task, and that it might enable refreshed reflection on what that task actually should be. At the same time, I am quite aware that preaching calls for humility and reverence before God and before the assembly of people gathered before God. It calls for even a certain amount of fear and trembling.

Augustine of Hippo, one of the greatest preachers in Christian history, said, “Insofar as I am a bishop”—that is, among other matters, a person responsible to speak the word of God in the assembly—“I am in danger.” Preaching ought not be safe. It takes place before the resistance of the world and, at the same time, under the judgment of God. Still, with this book, I hope to call attention to the kind of risk the preacher appropriately takes, the kind of authority the preacher rightly claims, and to encourage preachers to know that they do not do their work alone. They do it in and for an assembly. They do it in a company of preachers. And sometimes, taking a break, they do not do it at all. Augustine added, “Insofar as I am a believer, I am safe.” Preachers may better understand their own task by sometimes simply and gladly knowing that they cannot always do it and, instead, can take their place among all the

believers, singing the communal song, listening to other readers and preachers, holding out their hands, too, for Christ in the holy communion, resting in the safety of the mercy of God, being sent with all the others toward our needy neighbors.

What follows is first, a consideration of what preaching is, then some thoughts about how to prepare, including one sketch of a possible schedule for the preparatory week, and a few suggestions about how actually to preach. The book concludes with a model worksheet for preparation and with a bibliography for further reading. Throughout, I hope the reader will feel accompanied, not least by the deep gratitude that Christian assemblies have for faithful preachers, a gratitude I share and want to embody here.

The title of the book includes two participles: *Proclaiming* and *Living*. Those participles follow, of course, from the reality that preaching is an event, an oral/aural communal occurrence within the flow of the communal and sacramental events that make up the Christian liturgy. This book, one of a series of *Worship Matters Handbooks*, seeks to consider the preaching event within that flow of events, as part of the flow, as one articulation of what it means that we have gathered in the name of the triune God around these texts, around word and sacrament together, and thus as interwoven with all else that happens in the assembly.

While I have sometimes taught preaching in seminaries, I am

not a homiletician. I have learned a great deal from homileticians, as I hope the bibliography included here testifies. But I am a pastor and preacher, a vocation I have exercised now for fifty years, and I am a liturgist who has tried to reflect on the relationship between critical biblical studies and Christian liturgical practice. It is thus as a preacher and a liturgist that I write about the importance and role of biblical preaching in Christian Sunday and festival assemblies. I also write as a Lutheran, imagining a Lutheran theological context and pointing to Lutheran resources. I nonetheless hope that these reflections may also be of use to Christian preachers who are not Lutheran, being received as one particular contribution to an important ecumenical discussion about preaching.

It may be that what you find here differs from how you have thought of preaching before or what you have learned in studying homiletics. If so, I hope that the differences become a stimulus for your own interior dialogue and a renewal—perhaps even a reformulation—of your own convictions and practice, whether you finally agree with what is written here.

In any case, I profoundly hope that you find yourself encouraged again toward faithful preaching. If you are a preacher, if you seek Sunday after Sunday to articulate law and gospel—our great need and God's far greater mercy in Christ—deep thanks to you for what you do.

Gordon W. Lathrop

Thinking about preaching



Jesus Christ is the living and abiding Word of God. By the power of the Spirit, this very Word of God, which is Jesus Christ, is read in the Scriptures, proclaimed in preaching, announced in the forgiveness of sins, eaten and drunk in the Holy Communion, and encountered in the bodily presence of the Christian community. By the power of the Spirit active in Holy Baptism, this Word washes a people to be Christ's own Body in the world.

The Use of the Means of Grace²

Preaching in community

The preacher is not alone. Indeed, preachers most certainly ought not consider themselves to be alone. That is the place for us to begin thinking about faithful preaching: in community. Of course, preachers must do much of the preparation work at their own desks, in their own minds, and drawing upon their own formation and educational resources. Of course, the preacher will expend personal energy in the task. Of course, the preacher must have courage to speak as a single voice in the assembly and to speak with appropriate authority, and such courage does sometimes feel like a lonely undertaking, especially when the speaking must necessarily be countercultural. But taking the further step of regarding preaching as a moment of individual self-expression, as a monologue in which the preacher talks about him- or herself or his or her views on things or focuses on his or her own experience, as the solitary adventure of the lone wolf or the singular religious entrepreneur, or as the agonized work of an existentially isolated thinker—such a step will inevitably, painfully mislead us.

There are strong counterweights to these misconceptions and significant counterstrategies to this loneliness. Consider these: The preacher rises to speak in an assembly of Christian believers; preaching is for that very assembly, and the assembly needs the preacher to do his or her work well. Indeed, many members of that assembly will be wishing the preacher well, praying for the preacher, even calling out to the preacher—silently or aloud—in support or in summons for the preacher to speak the gospel. It may be hoped that members of the assembly are engaging in an interior dialogue with the words the preacher speaks, a dialogue the preacher evokes. By congregational text study or simply by widely practiced congregational text reading in the week prior to the sermon, some assemblies regularize this support: many in the community have already been thinking about these texts and their meaning for the community before the preacher rises to preach from them. Sometimes they have been thinking aloud in pre-sermon conversation with the preacher. And sometimes—in an event many preachers receive as a great gift—the conversation will continue after the liturgy.

“Then the records of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read for as long as there is time. When the reader has concluded, the presider in a discourse admonishes and invites us into the pattern of these beautiful things. Then we all stand together and offer prayer . . .

Justin, 1 Apology 67³