



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Preaching the Word (Homiletics)

Lesson #27

D. Preparing to Preach a Sermon on John 3:14-18

- Step 1: Begin with Prayer
- Step 2: Choose a Text
- Step 3: Study the Text and Context
- Step 4: Look for Law and Gospel
- Step 5: Find the Main Point
- Step 6: Determine the Order of Presentation
- Step 7: Apply the Word to Your Audience
- **Step 8: Choose the Right Words**
- Step 9: Prepare an Introduction and a Conclusion

As a beginning preacher, when you sit down to write the words of your first sermon, you may find it to be a difficult task and you might wonder whether you will ever be able to succeed and finish the sermon. Usually your first effort will need some improvement. It is good to have an experienced preacher as a mentor who is willing to look over your first effort and make suggestions for how it can be improved.

One mistake you may make at first is to include too much in your sermon. In your study of your text, you have learned many things. You may want to include everything you have learned in your sermon. But you cannot do this in one sermon. A preacher generally has to know considerably more than what he teaches. You will select from the material that you have available to you in order to accomplish the goal of your sermon, that is, to communicate the main point of your text and sermon to your listeners so that they understand it.

It is important to focus on one main point. Everything you say in your sermon should be connected in one way or another to your main point. It is so easy to get carried away on some subordinate or minor point that takes you away from your main point. You will have to ask yourself: "Does this paragraph help to bring out my main point, or does it lead away from my main point?" In order to stick to the main point of your sermon, you may even have to omit or barely mention certain points that are found in your text but do not pertain to what you have determined is your main point. In other words, the best sermon is the sermon that sticks to the main point and does not wander into many other areas of thought.

Another way to say this is: your sermon should not be a little about a lot of different things, but it should be a lot about one main thing. You may include anything that explains, illustrates, supports, or applies your main point, but you should leave out of your sermon anything that strays from the main point, even if it is important, true and interesting. You can save such important, true and interesting material for another sermon, when it helps to explain the main point of that other sermon. You will probably also have the opportunity to preach on a text again, so you may choose a different main point that these other things would then support.

As you follow the order you have arranged for your sermon, you need to include words and ideas that present the point that you are making. Naturally, much of your material will come from the text itself. In other words, you will use what your text says about the point you are making. If what you say comes from your text, and you have understood it correctly, what you are proclaiming is God's Word and is

absolutely true, so you can present what you are saying with authority; you have God's Word to back you up. You are simply making plain what is in the text itself and applying it to your hearers.

One helpful way to prepare a sermon is to look at how your text applies to you and speaks to you. In what way do the law elements in your text accuse you of wrong-doing? How do you react to the accusations that God is bringing against you in your text? This will help you know how to speak to others. What touches your heart will often touch the hearts of others. The same is true of the Gospel elements in your text. How has the Gospel in your text comforted you and assured you of your forgiveness and salvation? Give the same comfort and encouragement you receive from the text to the persons in your audience.

In order to impress on your listeners the important points found in your text, it is often helpful to find other passages in Scripture that teach the same things that your text teaches. Use these other passages to emphasize the point that your text is making. The more we know the Scriptures, the easier it will be to find and use other passages. Your Bible probably gives related passages in the center column or in footnotes at the bottom of the page. It is important, however, to be sure that these other Scripture passages do indeed teach what you say they are teaching. We do not want to use Bible passages to prove certain points that these passages do not really prove.

When you are dealing with concepts like love or obedience or faith, it is often helpful to look for an example from Bible history. The explanations to Luther's Small Catechism are often helpful with this. Say, for example, that you want to give an example of a person who trusts in God's Word. The Luther's Small Catechism by Michael Sydow¹ gives three examples of persons who trusted in God in its explanation of the First Commandment: David in his battle against Goliath, Daniel when he was thrown into the den of lions, and the three friends of Daniel who were thrown into the fiery furnace. This catechism also supplies some Bible passages that refer to trust in God. If you are trying to present the concept of trust in your sermon, you may find some of these Bible passages helpful to quote in your sermon because they help you to establish the point you are trying to make. Remember that when you are quoting Scripture, you are quoting highest authority possible: the very Word of God. But make sure that you fully understand the meaning of the passage you want to quote in its context in Scripture.

You can also use other sources outside of the Bible in order to illustrate or give an example of the point you are making in your sermon. Perhaps there is a song stanza known by your listeners that illustrates the point you want to make. If your church body or congregation has a statement of its faith, a fitting quotation from that may be helpful. Perhaps there is a well-known incident from the history of your country or people that illustrates the point you are making. Or maybe you can use current events in your country, or some popular saying or song.

As you become better acquainted with the individuals you are addressing in your sermons, you may learn that they have certain questions in their minds that they have been asking you or have been discussing among themselves. You may find that the text of your sermon provides answers to some of these questions. Since these are matters you know your listeners are thinking about, use your sermon as an opportunity to mention the question or questions and present the answer from your text. However, you must do this without betraying any private conversations you have had with your listeners.

Some preachers tell little stories that may have something to do with the sermon and its theme. These may be stories from your own life and experience, or stories that you have heard from others. If you want to use a story, you should ask yourself whether you are telling the story simply to entertain your or please your audience. If that is the case, you should omit the story and save it for some other occasion.

¹ *Martin Luther's Small Catechism – A Handbook of Christian Doctrine*

A story that illustrates the point you are making can not only help your audience understand your point, but a story can provide a needed brief break in your sermon. Listening to a sermon filled with information can be tiring. A story, or even pausing to review what you have said so far, can provide an important interlude that lets your audience “catch their breath” before you continue presenting additional information and encouragement. You could think of this as an island in the sea of your sermon. You will exhaust your audience if they have to continually swim to keep up with what you are saying. If you provide one or two “islands” (so to speak) in your sermon – lighter sections that review or illustrate what you already said – you can help your audience reflect on what you have said so far and help them regain some stamina so they will be able to listen attentively to the rest of your sermon.

Questions

1. Why is it important limit your sermon to one main point?
2. What is the difference between saying “a little about a lot” and “a lot about little”? Which is better in a sermon?
3. Why is it important to apply the text to yourself first before you write your sermon?
4. What books are available to you that can to help you write your sermons?
5. Where can you find examples to illustrate concepts found in your text?
6. When should you tell a story in your sermon, and when should you refrain from telling a story?