



The Sabbath Is for Preaching

Martin Luther's explanation of the Sabbath commandment in his *Small Catechism* says nothing at all about a day, neither Saturday nor Sunday, but rather, "We are to fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching or God's word, but instead keep the word holy and gladly hear and learn it."

So, Sabbath is about preaching. That got me thinking about my own experiences of preaching. My earliest recollection is sleeping through the sermon with my head on my mother's lap, sitting in the church balcony while my father was away during WWII. One Sunday, the pastor said that my blue and white striped outfit looked like pajamas, so I refused to wear it again. My mother was less than pleased.

Then, after the war, the primary sermons I heard were from my father. They were certainly textual, since I never saw him preach without first translating the texts himself from the Hebrew and Greek. That example has been hard for me to live up to. The sermons were also very "Lutheran"—that is, whatever the given text, the sermons clearly reflected Lutheran theology. Not a bad thing, but a bit repetitive.

I hardly remember sermons in college, in part, no doubt, because I did not always go to church. Sermons during my seminary years were preached by my fellow students (and once by me) except on Wednesdays, when faculty members preached. The student sermons were sometimes halting, sometimes impressive, but those faculty sermons rocked my world. It was as though I heard the amazingly freeing voice of the gospel for the first time.

And then Heidelberg, where in the university church I heard preaching by that rich company of preachers who made up the theological faculty in those years. It was a galvanizing experience, even if the sermons were sometimes quite long. Peter Brunner regularly preached for an hour or more, but when someone once complained, Gerhard von Rad asked, "But what better do you have to do on Sunday morning?" Indeed!

After graduate school, I became my own preacher. A seminary teacher had reminded us that we must always preach also to ourselves, and I regularly found working toward a sermon, if not preaching it, to be an enlivening experience. A homiletics professor in Heidelberg told us that we were not ready to preach if we had not had some kind of "eureka" experience, suddenly hearing an old text come alive in a new way. I think he was right. More than once, upon reading an assigned text, I said to myself, "No problem. I know this text. I can just say...." But then re-reading the text several times, careful study, and simply the passing of time opened

a new dimension in a text that made a much better sermon than the one I had first planned.

At Luther Seminary, students preached rarely, but the sermons by faculty were usually good and often surprising (as a good sermon ought to be). My own preaching developed a great deal over those forty years. I became much more careful with words, and always preached from a manuscript, at first because of the strict time limit, but then because a careful choice of words seemed appropriate for a Christian sermon. It's not just a chat. I also became bolder, using a mixture of genres, including poetry, song, and dialogue. It was a good exercise, which I recommend.

In recent years, I have preached most frequently at a local nursing home. That has been a different kind of experience, since I was always one who fed off the energy in the room, and at the nursing home there often seemed to be none. One had to trust that the word was doing its work, all evidence to the contrary. Occasionally though, I heard feedback that made me realize that people heard more than I thought they did.

So, that's a brief recap of my preaching career—sermons both heard and delivered. What's the point, other than an exercise in nostalgia? Just this, I suppose: all of those sermons—by me or others, good or bad, halting or brilliant—were the word of God. Sometimes a hard thing to believe, because I knew all too well the earthen vessels from which that treasure emerged. Those sermons were not made word of God by the skills of the preacher but by the work of the Holy Spirit. They were certainly not infallible, but in, with, and under the preacher's human words God spoke.

A radical claim, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it more radically still: "The proclaimed word...is the Christ himself walking through his congregation as the Word."¹ And again: "The word of the apostles' preaching is the same Word which has borne in his body the sins of the whole world; it is Christ present in the Holy Spirit."²

That's enough to give the preacher pause, but also hope. The apostolic word is not dependent on the preacher's rhetoric or erudition; it is made God's word by God's own promise. True, if preachers are unprepared or incompetent, they might stand in the way of God's voice, whereas a skilled and gifted preacher might enhance the word; still, the presence of God's word depends on God's promise alone.

The Sabbath is about preaching, said Luther. It's about the very presence of God in our midst. Happy is the preacher who knows this, and happier still the parishioner who hears it.

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¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics*, rev. ed., ed. and trans. with critical commentary, Clyde E. Fant (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 101.

²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 244.