

**PREACHING GOD'S WORD  
TO THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY  
WORSHIPER**

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**"Practical and clear sermons hold an audience."**

**-16<sup>th</sup> century  
Augsburg Confession, Apology XXIV, 50**

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PRAYER: O Father in heaven, you have called us as pastors and shepherds of your people to the awesome task of weekly preaching the Good News of your one and only Son, Jesus Christ. In mercy, send forth an extra measure of the Holy Spirit into our hearts through your life-giving word and life-changing sacraments. In the midst of our apostate world, O Father, fill us with power to testify more boldly and fearlessly to the physical resurrection of your Son who fulfilled all the words of the prophets and became one of us. Amen.

## **I. 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY PEOPLE ARE ACCUSTOMED TO GOOD COMMUNICATORS**

### **A. BE PERSONAL, PRACTICAL, AND AUTHENTIC. CONNECT.**

Good communicators are personal, practical, and authentic. They connect. We just heard rock singer Joan Osborne wail out, "What If God Were One of Us." She clearly communicates who she is and what she believes or does not believe. As pagan, godless and bold as she is, she connects.

The calling of every preacher is to communicate and to connect. Samuel connected. Isaiah connected. Jeremiah connected. John the Baptist connected. Jesus connected.

Duke University campus chaplain William Willimon writes in his book Integrative Preaching, "Recently I asked a number of rural North Carolina congregations to define good preaching. The first thing I noted in these lay people responses was that most of them defined it by naming good preachers. They seemed to be unable to separate the preacher from the preaching...lay respondents listed one characteristic of their preaching that drew them in over and over again: '*They preach as if they were preaching to individual listeners and their problems.*'" <sup>1</sup> Willimon makes another point that applies to preaching: "In his influential book *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, Dean M. Kelley says that one of the reasons for the recent remarkable growth of conservative churches in American Protestantism is that they take seriously the need of people to find meaning in and make sense out of life." <sup>2</sup> Although Kelley's book was written over 30 years ago, it's still true in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when it comes to preaching. We are called to help people find meaning and make sense out of life. Such messages are to be sincere and authentic, not manipulative, "not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power" (I Corinthians 2:1-5). People turn off speakers who come across phony. As the saying goes, "Words that come from the heart -- enter the heart."

## B. VISUALIZE THE SERMON

One way to communicate heart to heart is to reduce or eliminate the use of notes and to visualize the sermon. Hugh Litchfield, professor of homiletics at Northern American Baptist Seminary in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, emphasizes 4 points when visualizing a sermon:

1. **FOCUS IT:** Preach on one main idea. Poor sermons go everywhere and lead to confusion and bewilderment. "You can not expect your listeners to follow you if you do not know where you are going. Make your point so simple and so clear that if I call you at 3:01 a.m. and ask what your sermon point is, you would be able to tell me in a sentence or a few words."
2. **PICTURE IT:** Think in pictures. "Wrestle with the Scripture until you can see it in your mind." People talk in pictures whenever they tell you a story. They'll tell you about what they saw driving to work, then they'll tell someone else. Every time they repeat the story, they will use different words but the basic picture remains the same. Tell your people what you see, then make the application for them.
3. **DESCRIBE IT:** Sum up your message in one or two words: "God" "Faith" "Christian Living" "Love" "Forgiveness. Then use metaphors or similies to describe the message, "God is like..." "Faith is like..." "Forgiveness is like..." Use images to describe the truth for your listeners.
4. **ABSORB IT:** After you have outlined your focused idea; included pictures and applications and images, then write out the sermon in full and absorb it. Practice preaching it out loud at least five times. This helps absorb and internalize the sermon. Dr. Litchfield says, "I practice every sermon in the shower. By the time Sunday comes, not one bar of soap remains unconverted. The sermon is inside of me. The truth has a hold on me. It's as if I have a caged lion in my heart that has to come out."

When you have completed the four points, then put your sermon manuscript aside and preach it. If you forget a story or illustration while preaching it's no big deal. Use your omitted part in one of your next 51 sermons! <sup>3</sup>

## C. LEARN FROM THE BEST COMMUNICATORS

If the calling of every preacher is to communicate and connect the truth of God's Word with God's people, then why not learn from some of the best communicators of our day and age as well as the past?

### GARRISON KEILLOR: "GET RECKLESS...USE REAL LIFE STORIES"

Garrison Keillor (b.1942), the great American Public Radio communicator of the mythical Minnesota town of Lake Wobegon, talked about public speaking in a *Time* magazine interview <sup>4</sup>: "On Wednesday he thinks seriously about his monologue and by Saturday he will have written out a fairly complete narrative...he carries no paper on stage. He does not memorize what he has written, but he knows most of the distance he wants to travel. 'You get tired of being afraid of embarrassing yourself,' Keillor says, 'And so rather than draw back and going in a direction you're sure of,

I think as a person gets older, you get reckless. I think you're suppose to get reckless...I think in telling a story, a person is to be carried away. You learn to talk until you think of something to say, which is something that I and others in the ministerial profession sometimes do."

Sometimes a preacher's best thoughts come in the pulpit. Share them. It's OK at times (not always) to get "reckless" by leaving the prepared manuscript when the Holy Spirit puts a powerful Word-driven thought into your heart.

In an "author appearance" event in Madison, Wisconsin on December 30, 2001, Keillor gave this thought on writing, "A writer does not write to impress people. A writer writes to communicate real life experiences." The same can be said of a preacher. A preacher is not to preach to impress people, but to communicate real life experiences, especially those in the Bible. If you read or hear a story that sounds fabricated, it probably is untrue. Good stories are real stories. The best ones are your stories.

Keep a notepad handy to write down real life stories. For example, on April 15, 2001 CBS reporter Dan Rather was interviewed on the TV show "The O'Reilly Factor." Rather was asked about people who do not tell the truth. Dan said, "I think you can be an honest person and [still] lie about any number of things." O'Reilly also asked Rather whether he thought Bill Clinton was an honest man. Dan replied, "Yes, Bill Clinton is an honest man." This is a real story that people relate to and alerts them to be aware of such false ideologies as relative truth and how one can use it to justify a lie (or any other sin). In this story it is vital to mention that this is not a political comment but a moral one. Republicans can distort the truth as much as Democrats. The point here is that our society is steeped in the belief of relative truth. How much have we personally bought into this lie? Do we justify our sins in a similar way? Real life stories...use them with caution, but use them. It is one way to connect your people with God's Word.

#### ROBERT L. STEVENSON: COPY, THEN ESTABLISH YOUR OWN STYLE

The gifted British writer Robert Lewis Stevenson (1850-94) once said, "To be a great writer, copy your favorite writer and write like him until you establish your own style."<sup>5</sup>

As a preacher, copy the style of a great preacher. There's a reason people listen to great preachers (TV, radio or down-the-block preachers). They communicate! We should not close ourselves off from great preachers because we do not agree with every point of their doctrine or because they do not preach a good law-gospel sermon. Learn from their style and why they are effective in today's world. Ask yourself, "How does he get my attention, keep it and drive home his point to me so powerfully?" There is no better message to communicate than the one God, in mercy, has given to us: "Christ and him crucified"! (I Corinthians 2:2). How can we preach it more effectively? While we cannot enhance the supernatural power of the Gospel and the Spirit's work, we can get in its way. Our prayer is to preach the message of Jesus so effectively that God's people only see Him and ignore us.

### BILLY GRAHAM: COMMON, CLEAR, WITH CONVICTION

One of the most effective Christian preachers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Billy Graham (b.1918). What made him a great preacher? God obviously gave him the ability and wisdom to speak plainly, clearly and with conviction. In a 1998 interview the 80+ year-old preacher who now walks with a cane said, "The message I preach is one of hope, that Christ offers all of us a way, and through that way we can find our future in heaven."<sup>6</sup> Everyone knew what he said. It was common, clear and with conviction. In a recent sermon, he gave this effective illustration: "The moment Princess Diana entered the limousine that night, she did not know it would be her last day on earth." Everyone relates to Lady Di and the car crash. Graham puts us in that car with a simple sentence! He paused to let it sink in. Then he concluded, "Be ready." Common, clear and with conviction.

### MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.: INVOLVING, ENGAGING, CAPTIVATING

One of the most involving, engaging, and captivating preachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-68). While we disagree with his focus on the social-gospel at the expense of the eternal saving gospel of Christ, and while we also reject his immoral lifestyle, yet at the same time we admire his ability to communicate and connect with his people. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke on behalf of millions of African Americans and minorities. He tried to relate Christian faith to hope for the oppressed. To make an African American sit in the back of the bus or drink from different water fountains or be refused at "white only" motels was blatant social injustice and clearly unchristian. James says, "Do not show favoritism" (James 2:1).

To drive home this injustice, King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech at the 1963 March on Washington D.C. It was involving, engaging and captivating. Please listen to a portion of that powerful presentation (the entire speech is printed in the Resource Section of this paper):

"I say to you today my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.' I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with words of interposition and nullification, one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together..."

Did Martin Luther King, Jr. communicate his message clearly? Do you know what he said? Can you picture his images vividly? Are you ready to sing, "We Shall Overcome?"

We pastors have a more important message to deliver every Sunday than a social gospel. We have the eternal gospel: "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes!" (Romans 1:16). What an involving, engaging, and captivating word God gives us to communicate: the message of repentance and Christ's forgiving, nail-scarred hands for a sin-broken world! Can you think of a greater cause that could move us to preach with more zeal and power? "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38,39). The Gospel—it is involving, engaging, captivating. It gives us substance to preach!

#### MARTIN LUTHER: PREACH EXCEEDINGLY SIMPLE AND TO THE PEOPLE'S NEEDS

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a captivating preacher. He also preached a lot. He preached 3,000 sermons in 35 years.<sup>7</sup> If you are in the ministry for 40 years you will preach about 2,000 sermons. "All sermons should be exceedingly simple, do not regard the prince, but rather the simple, foolish, rude and illiterate people...In preaching here [at Wittenberg] I stoop to the lowest level; I take no account of the two score doctors and magistrates who are present, but rather the throng of young people, children and servants, of whom there are some hundreds or thousands. To them I address myself, I adapt my sermon to their needs. If the others do not care to listen, the door is open."<sup>8</sup> Luther was urging preachers to preach to the majority of listeners, not to the few.

## WINSTON CHURCHILL: FIVE POINTS OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

One of the greatest masters of speeches and literature was the 1953 Nobel Prize winner for literature, Sir Winston Churchill (1874-1965). He said there are 5 points to public speaking:<sup>9</sup>

1. **BEGIN STRONGLY:** Do not use clichés (religious clichés in our case). Good starters are a story or quotation: “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.”<sup>10</sup> If you are preaching on persecution you could begin: “More Christians have been put to death for their faith in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in the first three Christian centuries combined.”
2. **PRESENT ONE THEME:** You may have various movements and points, but stick to one theme. One theme will engage your audience and hold their attention. Ask yourself: “What is the message I want my listeners to go home with?” Know this before you write your talk. Do not be diverted from your main message! Repetition to drive home a theme is good in a speech, if the repetition is done refreshingly. Look at Hebrew synonymous parallelism as one example: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Psalm 19).
3. **USE SIMPLE LANGUAGE:** “Their libidinal impulses being reciprocal, they activated their erotic drives and integrated them within the same frame of reference.” It is a much better simply to say: “They fell in love and married.” Be conversational, not formal and rigid. Formal: “justify.” Conversational: “off the hook.” Formal: “faith.” Conversational: “being certain of what you don’t see.”
4. **PAINT A PICTURE:** Picture this: “We will fight on the hills, we will fight in the streets, we will fight on the beaches...we will never surrender.” Can you picture that in your mind? Words like “tyranny” or “militarian” are abstract and do not set themselves indelibly in the minds of people. Expressions like, “I want Osama bin Laden, dead or alive!” paints a picture. It paints images of the wild-west and six shooters and hunting down the bad guy. Find images that communicate with your people. Picture this statement by Churchill: “You’re right, I’m not a pillar of the church, I’m a buttress – I support it from the outside.” Jesus used many pictures, a rabbinical approach to teaching and preaching. Although Paul used more theological, abstract terms, yet he also painted pictures: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (I Corinthians 12). If you’re preaching on Daniel in the lion’s den take your people to the zoo with your words and view the lions. You immediately form a picture in your listener’s minds. We’re a visual society. Picture this statement from Luther: “The virgin Mary lulls to sleep Him who rules the cosmic deep” (Martin Luther LW 35:3). “God’s in His heaven – All’s right with the world!” (Robert Browning). Paint a picture.
5. **END EMOTIONALLY:** Don’t end every sermon with “God grant this for Jesus’ sake. Amen.” It loses the impact and effect of the message just preached. It becomes a cliché. End with emotion: hope, love, pride, faith or vision. Churchill had this powerful ending to one of his speeches:

"Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'" <sup>11</sup>

### JONATHAN EDWARDS: BENT OVER BUT CAREFUL CONTENT

"Although he lacked certain of the outward gifts of the popular pulpit orator, yet his preaching attracted favorable attention. His voice was not strong, and he read his sermons from manuscripts that were but four inches square. His small handwriting made it necessary for him to bend closely over his written sermon. However, his superior learning and his personality were appreciated at once, and the meetinghouse was crowded. During the first six months of his ministry he gained over 300 new members. Five years later he was at the height of his popularity and his fame had spread throughout all of New England." <sup>12</sup> This style of preaching clearly worked for the strict Calvinist Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) who is credited with starting the Great Awakening in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1734-35. I doubt if his style would work today, but his careful work on content (although his interpretations were not all orthodox) is still a model for preachers: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who...correctly handles the word of truth" (II Timothy 2:15).

## II. 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY PEOPLE ARE SEEKING GOOD CONTENT

### A. USE GO(O)D CONTENT

While styles of communication change, the content is to remain the same for the 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian preacher. "Woe to me if I don't preach the gospel!" Paul proclaimed (I Corinthians 9:16). The introduction to the homiletics textbook *Preach The Gospel* states, "Worshippers in the chapel at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary see the inscription above the chancel arch: κηρυξατε το ευαγγελιον -- 'Preach the gospel!' This quotation from Mark 16:15 serves as a daily reminder to students and faculty that when our Lord Jesus had finished his work of redemption, he left his church the unfinished business of proclaiming his salvation to the world. The imperative...summarizes the church's mission..."<sup>13</sup>

The "foolishness" of preaching the power and wisdom of Christ is our calling and privilege (I Corinthians 1:20-24). Our sermons are to be scriptural: we are to "preach the Word" (II Timothy 4:2); careful: "correctly" handling the word of truth (II Timothy 2:15) and not "adding or subtracting" from it (Revelation 22:18f); eternal: always pointing to the only Name "by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12); and doctrinal: not filled with "godless chatter" (I Timothy 6:20).

"The purpose of preaching therefore is twofold. It is to lead sinners to Jesus and to edify those who already confess him as Savior and Lord." <sup>14</sup> We are to call all to "repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:14,15) and "thoroughly equip" God's people "for every good work" (II Timothy 3:16,17). Content is key to preaching. As Prof. James Westendorf puts it, "You need content first. Delivery second." <sup>15</sup> Martin Luther tells us to preach the biblical text, not about blue ducks: "Unless spiritual knowledge and the Spirit Himself speak through the preachers...the final result will be that everyone preaches his own whims, and instead of the Gospel



and its exposition, we shall again have sermons on blue ducks.”<sup>16</sup> More and more people in our culture are sick of “blue duck” sermons. Many are looking for solid, absolute truth. By God’s grace, we have it and are called to preach it. We do not preach it, of course, because it may be popular, we preach it because it is God’s Word, popular or not.

#### B. SW & YBH

Good content, however, needs to be made relevant. “Effective preaching is always timely preaching... It speaks to the specific needs of a particular congregation. It relates to people.”<sup>17</sup> Two questions people ask in a sermon are these: SW? YBH? SW is the “So What?” of preaching. “I gave you my time, so what? The SW of a sermon should start from the moment the “double-edged sword” is drawn (Hebrews 4:12). YBH is the “Yes But How?” of preaching. People want to know how they can apply the message of the sermon in their daily lives.”<sup>18</sup>

#### C. DON’T COAST, GET BETTER

To answer the questions “So What?” and “Yes, But How?” takes work, lots of work. It’s easy to avoid these questions and preach historical sermons with little to no application. But Paul urges us in Colossians 3: 23 “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord...” Anyone who preaches at least 50 sermons a year (no matter what ones skill level is) should not stay the same, but get better. If our preaching is the “same-old-same-old” using religious clichés and not presenting the gospel in refreshing ways, it may be a sign of coasting. We should not just “get by,” we are called to give God our best. To coast is cheating God’s people every week. Go to preaching seminars. Listen to sermon tapes by great preachers. Read powerful sermons. Get together with area pastors to discuss the upcoming texts. There’s no better time to give our best than when we weekly meet with the majority of God’s people in corporate worship.

#### D. BE OPEN TO CRITICISM

I’ve been preaching for more than 25 years. Over the years I have taken criticism, some kind, some not so kind. When I first came to the Chapel, one of the laziest, most complaining students in our campus ministry revolutionized my preaching. One day he approached me with these words, “I enjoy coming here and having fun with my friends, but your sermons do not help me at all.” My first reaction was to disregard his criticism. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that I was spending a small amount of time in sermon preparation and a lot of time trying to do everything everyone requested of me. I started to realize that my priority should be in preaching. That is what I was primarily called to do. Sunday and Wednesday (two different sermons) were the times when people came together to hear God’s Word. I started to give my best to preaching and asked laity to do some of the other areas of ministry. Fifteen years after my encounter with the critical student another student told me, “You’re the best preacher I’ve ever heard.” My hat size grew for a while, but not for long. I asked my three sons to rate my preaching on a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the best.

They had heard a number of different preachers over the years so they could make a comparison. I encouraged them to be honest. They gave me a 6. I thought to myself, "Only a 6?" I guess there is lots of room for improvement! It's good to take criticism from your co-workers too. One of my co-workers who has seen me preach many times told me, "When you preach on Wednesday night and wear your suit coat, get your hands out of your pockets and speak with authority!" She was right. The truth hurts. I no longer put my hands in my pockets when I preach. Little things can make a difference in how a message comes across. Post-sermon feedback (that is sought and listened to) will improve your preaching. Recently someone wrote in the comment section of our Friendship Register, "It amazes me how the sermon is always relevant to things I've been thinking about." Positive strokes move us to do better too. Maybe I'm a 6.1 by now!

#### E. PRAY

While it's important to grow in communication skills, a crucial area of growth for preachers is in prayer. Jesus was a preacher. He also prayed. No one prayed more than Jesus. One would think if anyone could skip prayer it would be the Son of God. Yet before he chose the twelve apostles, Jesus "spent the night praying" (Luke 6:12; CW 548:1). Luke tells us "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16). If Jesus prayed often, then we preachers need to... And God will respond.

The Spirit-written book of Acts reports: "After they [Peter and John and the other believers] prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" (Acts 4:31). The Holy Spirit of the 1<sup>st</sup> century is still the same Holy Spirit of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He still is present to help us speak God's word boldly as we come to him in prayer.

### **III. 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY PEOPLE ARE ATTUNED TO VARIETY**

#### TOUCHING ALL FIVE SENSES

While more and more 21<sup>st</sup> century people are seeking content with meaning to it, they also are attuned to variety in communication. Seminary President David Vallesky says, "For many in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, cable TV, the internet, movies, and music is the style of communication to which they have become accustomed. While we should be careful not to cheapen our way of presenting the gospel, we need to find ways to connect with today's people."<sup>19</sup>

Making use of the auditory, the visual, the kinesthetic, the flavorful, and the aromatic to communicate Christ's gospel offers such variety. It is nothing new. God, through his inspired writers, gave us his word to hear and meditate on day and night (Psalm 1:2); he put a rainbow in the sky to remind us visually of his unbroken promises; we are called to bow down and kneel before the Lord our Maker (Psalm 95:6); in Holy Communion we literally "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8); and when Noah sacrificed burned offerings to the Lord the smell was a pleasing aroma to him (Genesis 8:21; Psalm 141:2; Hebrews 9:4). The five senses were ways God communicated with his people. He still uses them today.

Dr. Mark D. Hinds in his article "Wisdom's Gift: Generation X and the Problem of Print-Oriented Religious Education" writes, "To embrace an oral, aural, electronic, and cautious generation, it behooves teachers of religious education to explore other than print oriented strategies for teaching and learning"<sup>20</sup> The same can be said for preaching. While the biblical text is still central to our message, the mode of getting across the message may have to change. It is not only the youth, but also the elderly who appreciate variety in communication because they also are being communicated to through electronics and the rest of the high tech world.

There is, however, a warning: if we are going to try to get across God's truth with new technology, we need to study how to use such technology. More than once we have seen modern technology and methodologies used ineffectively (for example, when it distracts from the message or it comes off "tasteless or tacky or cheesy," as students will say). Like anything else, learning how to use technology takes work. Nothing good comes easy. But if it is done carefully and well, it is worth the time. Our goal is to communicate God's powerful, Spirit-filled word so it touches the hearts of the listener. In his 1924 *Homiletics* textbook, Lutheran theologian Johann Michael Reu said, "Unless it is the aim of the sermon to reach and move the heart, there can be no true edification."<sup>21</sup> After Peter preached his sermon on Pentecost, his listeners were "cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37). Using a variety of modern-day tools as vehicles to powerfully present God's Word is one way of getting to people's hearts. This is not a matter of manipulation, but clear communication.

"The electronic culture has altered the ways people expect to learn,"<sup>22</sup> says Neil Postman, the author of the 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. The large question we face is: "How much should we give-in to our electronic culture?" Our goal in preaching is not to entertain people, but to communicate the truth to people! If the purpose and goal of using variety in our preaching is simply to amuse people with little or no substance, then it is being abused in the church. On the other hand, if the purpose of touching the worshiper's five senses in preaching is to drive home God's truth as effectively as possible, then it is to be commended. God "richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (I Timothy 6:17) - including sermons - but they need to contain substance.

#### READ SCRIPTURE DRAMATICALLY

Hearing is the most common of the five senses we touch. "Faith comes by hearing" the apostle Paul asserts. One way to drive home God's truth is by a dramatic reading of scripture. Immediately after I preached a sermon on Ephesians 5:8-14 entitled "Live As Children of Light," three readers spoke, through microphones, this dramatic scripture reading...<sup>23</sup> Please listen...

## INCORPORATE MUSIC TO ILLUSTRATE YOUR MESSAGE

Music is a powerful medium for today's generation. A sermon with a popular song can help illustrate your message.

During the fall semester of 2000-01 we at the Chapel did a 6-Part Series at our midweek Vespers entitled "Rock 'n the Word." We played a short portion of a contemporary song and then compared it with Scripture. For example, one theme was MATERIALISM/SALVATION. The Rock song lyrics: "We're living in a material world and I'm a material girl" quoted from "Material Girl" by Madonna. The Word of God: "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" quoted from Mark 8:36 by Jesus. The homily, preached by a pastor in his late 60s, was very effective. I won't mention the pastor's name since John Chworowsky would not want me to do that. This midweek Vespers series of songs, of course, were aimed at college students.

But one Sunday morning, with a congregation of mixed ages present, I preached on Genesis 28 (Jacob's Ladder). My theme was "Stairway to Heaven." After reading the text and praying, the sermon began with these words:

"It's the most requested song in rock 'n roll radio history. Someone has said, 'It is one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most memorable musical statements.' According to *Guitar World* magazine (September, 1998), of the 100 greatest solos of all time, it is #1. What am I talking about? I'm talking about the song "Stairway to Heaven" on Led Zeppelin's #4 album. I'll play the first 1½ minutes of the song. See if you recognize it....

"Of course, the phrase 'Stairway to Heaven' is nothing new. It goes back almost 4,000 years to the time of the Old Testament patriarch Jacob. But the song, which was written by British rock singer Robert Plant in the spring of 1971, contains nothing about Jacob; nothing about angels; and nothing about the LORD God. Yet, there seems to be an interesting connection between the song and Holy Scripture. It is a contrast between Western civilization and Christianity. The first line of 'Stairway to Heaven' is this: 'There's a lady who's sure, all that glitters is gold and she's buying a stairway to heaven...' The September 1998 issue of *Guitar World* magazine interprets the song as 'man's quest for salvation' (p.58). The question is: 'Salvation from what?' From the problems of life: emptiness, loneliness and hopelessness. So where do we find salvation from these things? The song 'Stairway to Heaven' does not give any solid answers. But God's Word does. That is why we are looking at Genesis 28 this morning..."

My sermon went on to contrast the song's work-righteous quest and Christ as the solution to that quest. The sermon ended with a reference to John 1:51 which identifies Jesus as the Stairway to Heaven!

After I preached the sermon, I was amazed how many people—all ages—quoted the first line of the song to me, verbatim. Some quoted the entire song. It connected. By linking a popular song with a biblical text, it indirectly gives listeners a message that they should be discerning when they are exposed to world ideologies. Whether we like it or not, the media heavily touches our people and their thinking. We need to find different ways to communicate effectively what God's word says in contrast to what the world says. Music is one way to connect those two together.

### HAVE YOUR LISTENERS PARTICIPATE IN YOUR SERMON

Studies have shown that in a one-way presentation the listener retains 7-10% of the message. If a speaker supplements the presentation with visuals enhancement, such as power point, videos and objects, the information retention rises 38-45%. If the listeners are allowed to participate: to respond to a question, to repeat a phrase, to kneel on the floor and other kinesthetic activities, the information retention increases to 65-70%! <sup>24</sup>

In one of my sermons I mentioned how Luther would chase away his depression by touching his forehead (where the water of holy baptism was applied to him as an infant) and say, "I am baptized!" At the end of my sermon I had the congregation repeat those words after me three times in a row (to remind us of our Trinitarian baptism). When I preached on "Bowing Down Before God" I asked them to kneel on the floor at the end of my sermon for prayer (like many churches used to do after communing). People tend to remember sermons where they are physically involved.

But preparing these sermons takes great care. Timing, explanation, and what you have them physically do can make all the difference in whether the activity is instructive or distractive. Carefully plan in advance how you will carry out such participation.

For example, if you are preaching a sermon on evangelism you can ask three people to come to the front of the church. I need three volunteers to come to the front right now...

On occasion, have your listeners participate in your sermon.

Jesus did that. Once he brought a little child to stand among his disciples and said, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never..." (Matthew 18:3).

### CAPTURE YOUR CONGREGATION'S IMAGINATION WITH A NARRATIVE SERMON

Jesus engaged his listeners in many ways. Another way was through narrative presentations. Most of the time he used extended metaphor or parable. A story creates images in the mind. If I say "prodigal son," immediately images (not necessarily words) come to your mind—a Jewish boy sitting in a pig pen; a father waiting and waiting for his wayward son to come home; a disgusted brother.

Seminary homiletics professor Richard Gurgel comments, "People today are so used to story and plot. We are in a visual story-telling age. Allow the beauty of the biblical narrative to come alive in preaching."

The day when people can follow closely-reasoned and tightly-knit doctrine (Walther style) is gone. Make use of pictures and narratives of God's people to show them that doctrine is eminently practical. Preach law and gospel with stories of scripture."<sup>25</sup> After preaching a first-person sermon entitled "Grab The Sword and Let's Go," seminary professor Mark Zarling said an 80 year person came up to him and said, "I really appreciated that sermon. A story is so easy to follow." Zarling took on the character of Eshchol, a man who allied himself with Abram (Genesis 14:13-24).<sup>26</sup> At Thanksgiving time this year I preached a sermon entitled "Remember Martin Rinkart." Who is Martin Rinkart? His entire ministry was conducted during the 30 Years War in Germany. He buried hundreds and hundreds of people including his own wife. Throughout the sermon I repeated the I Thessalonians 5 phrase, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." Rinkart's ministry demonstrated the power of the Holy Spirit in horrible circumstances. Only the Spirit could move Rinkart to write a thanksgiving hymn in the midst of open suffering and death. You probably know the hymn: "Now Thank We All Our God."<sup>27</sup>

"For the hearer, a narrative...is received as a series of images. The hearer's imagination is engaged. Like a filmmaker using a storyboard to establish a plot line, the preacher moves from scene to scene, offering one image after another... Those images, as much or perhaps more than the story's words, make the story memorable."<sup>28</sup> When I saw the two towers of the World Trade Center come crashing down, I immediately thought to myself, "God is bringing America to its knees!" I painted that picture in the minds of my members that Sunday.

Narrative preaching is also called "inductive preaching." Information on inductive preaching is found in the "Notes" at the end of this manuscript.<sup>29</sup>

#### DRIVE HOME A TRUTH WITH A FILM CLIP

In the book *Liturgical Preaching*, Lutheran theologian Dean Nadasdy says, "Walking into a Cineplex is not unlike walking through Athens to Mars Hill. It just may be that the screens in our theatres are the new altars to an unknown god, waiting to be broken open with the Gospel."<sup>30</sup> Just like people loved to discuss philosophy on Mars Hill, today people love to discuss movies. For several years, some of our churches have used Bible movies during Lent to present the Passion History of our Lord. Why not use secular movie clips to teach a truth.<sup>31</sup> For example, if you are preaching on Matthew 6 and driving home Jesus' point not to worry, show a portion of *The Lion King* where the warthog Pumbaa and the meerkat Timon try to teach the young lion Simba how to deal with worry....

What a secular film clip in a sermon will do, without even having to say a word, is to indirectly teach your congregation to be discerning when they watch movies. It will help them learn how to compare God's word with the messages of the world. A pastor, of course, needs to be discrete with the movies he chooses to show during a sermon. Timing and length of the movie clip along with an explanation of it and practicing it, will assure effectiveness in driving home a truth.

## USE AN ART PIECE TO TEACH

"Art is not a substitute for preaching. But as medieval cathedrals were called 'sermons in stone,' so works of art can enhance and illustrate the Word of God as proclaimed from the pulpit. It can give the preacher a visual vocabulary." <sup>32</sup> Good preaching is both heard and seen. The Word creates. God spoke and things became visual. So it is with good preaching. Why talk about the Lord's Supper when you can point to it 10 feet away? The baptismal font, the altar, the cross, the windows with pictures in them, the paraments, the carvings...they all are objects that can be used to teach. Display a Christian oil painting or an art piece for a sermon illustration. People love visuals. I preached a sermon once at Thanksgiving using the well-known early 1900 photograph (it's not a painting like many think) of an old man folding his hands at a table with a loaf of bread, a Bible and a bowl. It's called "Grace" and it originated in Bovey, Minnesota. Use a piece of Americana to teach sin and grace!

In his article "Preaching and the Visual Arts," Dean W. Nadasdy writes, "Over the altar in the church of my childhood is a life-size sculpture of Jesus Christ." <sup>33</sup> The sculpture replicates Thorvaldsen's [Danish sculptor 1768?-1844] famous image of Christ, his arms extended in welcome. The story goes that Thorvaldsen originally intended to show a glorious Christ, arms raised in triumph. The studio was very warm that day, however, and the [newly carved clay] model let his arms drop. The result was a Christ with arms in the welcoming position. Thorvaldsen stayed with the latter. All these years later, when I think of Christ, trying to picture him in my mind, I am brought back to that sculpture. That is due in no small measure to my childhood pastor's frequent use of the sculpture in his preaching. It was nothing that profound. My pastor simply and frequently pointed to the sculpture from the pulpit at the mention of Jesus' name. For a child that gesture, repetitive and natural, created an inescapable link between word and image, between Word incarnate and the word ensulptured." <sup>34</sup>

## INTRODUCE YOUR SERMON WITH A DRAMATIC SKETCH

Drama is another way to illustrate your sermon. Drama is nothing new in the Bible: the prophet Ahijah tore into twelve pieces a new cloak in front of King Jeroboam to show how the kingdom of Israel would be divided (I Kings 11:31); at God's orders, Hosea married a prostitute to illustrate Israel's unfaithfulness (Hosea 1:2); to symbolize bearing the sins of Israel and Judah, Ezekiel laid on his left side for 390 days and on his right side for 40 days. He also used manure for fuel to bake food so the unrepentant Israelites would eat defiled food like they would in the pagan land to which they were going to be exiled (Ezekiel 4).

Drama can be used effectively to get across a message or introduce a teaching. A WELS pastor once told me that he saw a drama on Christ's descent into hell. He said, "I'll never forget it." I asked when he saw it. He said, "Thirty years ago." Drama can have a lasting spiritual impact.

One way to use drama is to introduce your sermon with it. These drama sketches run from 4 to 8 minutes long and often present a problem with no solution. The sermon – grounded in God’s word – gives the solution. It’s important to present a short prologue before the sketch to introduce the theme and explain the purpose of drama. After the drama sketch, have a “long epilogue” (i.e., the sermon) to expound on the text for the day. Here’s a sample:

TEXT: Luke 10:38-42 (Mary, Martha & the One Thing Most Needed)

PROLOGUE: “This morning’s drama sketch is not intended to give answers but to raise questions, questions about how we look at our life. Have you ever felt that you were in control of your life? Have you ever tried to ‘do it all?’ So did Hank. Just watch.”

DRAMA SKETCH: “THE PLATE SPINNER” (4:20)<sup>35</sup>

Using visual aids is not natural. If they are not used properly, they can be distracting to the message. But if we study how to use them, they can be very effective in driving home God’s truth.

#### LEAVE GUILT FREE AND WITH SOME GOOD IDEAS

I wish to thank you for inviting me to share a few ideas on preaching with you today. However, this presentation is not meant to fill you with guilt that you should try this or that in your preaching. My prayer is to challenge you with new ideas and encourage you to share ideas of preaching with each other. Do not say to yourself, “How can I do all these things?” Instead, say to yourself, “What is one thing I can work on that can improve my preaching? How can I challenge myself and raise the bar for my preaching in order to be a better communicator and to connect God’s word more effectively with God’s people?” As one comment in the Lutherans Confessions states, “There’s nothing that so attaches people to the church as does good preaching.”<sup>36</sup>

We have the most powerful weapon in the world – a weapon that calls people to repentance; a weapon of forgiveness and healing and eternal hope; we have “the sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17), “the living and active” word of God (Hebrews 4:12), the “good news” of the slain, risen, and ascended Lord Jesus Christ! (Mark 1:15). And God has called each and every one of us with the privilege to use that sword!

The book of Acts tells us, “With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and much grace was upon them all” (Acts 4:33).

With the great power of God’s word and sacraments, we also continue to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. And much grace is also upon us.  
It’s true.

To God be the glory!



## NOTES

This presentation was given April 10, 2002 at the Minnesota District Spring WELS Pastoral Conference, Schwan Retreat & Conference Center, Trego, Wisconsin

1. William Willimon, *Integrative Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 15.
2. *Ibid.*, 64.
3. The four points were taken from a July, 1998 article in *The Calling*, a publication of Ministers Life Resources, St. Paul, Minnesota. Litchfield's book is "Visualizing The Sermon: A Guide To Preaching Without Notes", Fairway Press 1-800-537-1030, N. American Baptist Bookstore. 1-800-440-6227.
4. Time magazine, November 4, 1985
5. This Stevenson quote comes from author Shelby Foote in a 2002 TV C-Span "Book Notes" interview.
6. This quote is from the 10-31-98 Wisconsin State Journal, Madison "Billy Graham's long road." An 8-16-01 USA TODAY article says, "As always, Billy Graham turned all his thoughts to his perennial themes of forgiveness, love and unity. 'The lost will be saved, the saved will be edified, and the edified will be unified. And the only unifying force is Christ.'"
7. Most of Luther's sermons we have today are not directly the words of Luther but notes taken by students according to Rev. Harold Wicke in an 11-15-83 talk on preaching.
8. M. Reu, *Homiletics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1924, 1950 reprint), 138.
9. Churchill's five points were presented in a TV lecture from the U of Penn, Philadelphia on 9-6-96. The lecturer was James C. Humes, author and presidential speechwriter for Eisenhower, Nixon, Ford & Reagan. A video of the speech is available from American Perspective 1-800-c-span-98.
10. James C. Humes, *The Wit and Wisdom of Winston Churchill* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995 paperback), 117.
11. *Ibid.*, 121.
12. F. R. Webber, *A History of Preaching in Britain and America Part III* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1957), 84, 85.
13. Richard Balge & Joel Gerlach, *Preach The Gospel* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1982), xi.
14. *Ibid.*, 4.
15. Personal interview March 6, 2002 at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon.
16. Don Deffner, *The Preacher's Workshop Series: "The Real Word for the Real World"* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977), p.33. The quote is from Luther's *Deutsche Messe*, 1526. \* AUGUSTINE (354-430 A.D.) wrote the first homiletics textbook we have: Book 4 - "On Christian Doctrine". He says the PURPOSE OF A SERMON is to 1) TEACH - the content of the Christian faith: "I learned something from your sermon." 2) DELIGHT - the listener by spiritually touching him: "I was moved by your sermon." 3) PERSUADE - a person to change his ways: "I intend to do something about what you said in the sermon." Augustine borrowed his basic structure from the Roman orator Cicero (106-43 B.C.)
17. Balge, Gerlach, *Preach the Gospel*, 11.

18. Michael Quicke, quoted in *Preaching* (Jackson, TN: January/February, 2002 Vol. 17, No. 4), 9.
19. Personal interview March 6, 2002 at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon.
20. Dr. Mark D. Hinds, "Wisdom's Gift," *Religious Education*, Fall 2001 (Volume 98, Number 30), 518. Hinds is a Presbyterian pastor in Richmond, Virginia.
21. Reu, *Homiletics*, 119
22. Postman's quote is taken from the *Religious Education* article by Dr. Hinds, 514.
23. A manuscript of this Dramatic Scripture reading is in the Resource Section of this document. "Out of the Darkness...Into the Light" was written by Anne Hansen a speech therapist in Madison, WI and a member of Wisconsin Lutheran Chapel.
24. Duane D. Anderson, "Enhancing the Sermon with Visuals," *WELS at Worship - North Atlantic* newsletter, Spring 1989, 3, 4.
25. Personal interview March 6, 2002 at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon.
26. A copy of this sermon by Prof. Zarling is printed in the Preaching Resource Section of this document.
27. This narrative sermon ("Remember Martin Rinkart") is found in the Preaching Resource Section of this document.
28. Dean W. Nadasdy, *Liturgical Preaching—Contemporary Essays: "Preaching and the Visual Arts"* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2001), 196.
29. In 1971, homiletics professor Fred Craddock wrote the book "As One Without Authority" (Nashville: Abingdon). It revolutionized preaching in America. In the book, Craddock, considered one of the best 20<sup>th</sup> century American preachers, promoted inductive preaching. Today, the book is justifiably criticized for his reason for inductive preaching (i.e., since contemporary people saw the Bible as an ancient unrelated book for today, we must preach inductively, not deductively. The preacher, according to Craddock, must begin with human experience of God's everyday grace and judgment and work from there. The preacher is to use our experiences and then show people that the gospel is about those experiences. You may wish to read "Good News in Exile" by Copenhaver, Robinson & Willimon; Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1999, 47f. They were liberals who moved towards the right.) However, what Craddock did was to awaken us to narrative preaching. Below is a brief explanation of the difference between deductive and inductive preaching:

## DEDUCTIVE PREACHING (Proposition style of preaching)

The starting point of a sermon is a proposition/a specific truth.

The Movement of the sermon goes from a proposition to applications.

The movement of the sermon is like starting at the top of a PYRAMID (one truth) and going to the bottom (i.e., a broad base of applications). The outline may look like this:

Introduction (main point)

I.

A. Application

I.

II.

B. Application

I.

## INDUCTIVE PREACHING (Narrative style)

The starting point of a sermon is the application and/or a story.

The Movement of the sermon heads for a proposition/specific truth.

Picture a PYRAMID and moving from the base of it heading upwards toward the point/proposition/specific truth. The outline might look like this:

I.

2.

A. Application

I.

2.

B. Application

I. Main Point

(See Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, p.152)

30. Nadasdy, *Liturgical Preaching*, 204.

31. "Videos That Teach" (Zondervan, 1999) is available from NPH 1-800-662-6022

32. Nadasdy, *Liturgical Preaching*, 192.

33. The church is St. Martini Lutheran Church (LCMS) in Chicago, and the sculpture still stands.

34. Nadasdy, *Liturgical Preaching*, 191.

35. *The Plate Spinner* is from the video "Sunday Morning Live" Vol. 4 (a collection of 6 drama sketches), Zondervan, 1993. Order from Willow Creek Association 1-800-570-9812.

36. "There's nothing that so attaches people to the church as does good preaching." - 16<sup>th</sup> century Augsburg Confession, Apology XXIV, paragraph 50, a bracketed comment in the F. Bente, *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921), p.

401.

## PREACHING RESOURCE SECTION

### I. BIBLE STUDY

"The Art of Listening To A Sermon (Homiletics 101)" (attached)

### II. SERMON BOOKS & PERIODICALS & TAPES & VIDEOS & WEB SITES

A. *God's Trombones (Seven Negro Sermons in verse)* by James Weldon Johnson, (New York: The Viking Press, 1927) – also in a clay animation video from Vision Video, Worcester, PA 1-800-523-0226.

B. *Great Preachers: /The Odyssey Channel Collection* (a video series on the most effective preachers in the English-speaking world – a Baylor University study) obtain from Vision Video 1-800-523-0226 [www.gatewayfilms.com](http://www.gatewayfilms.com)

C. *Liturgical Preaching: Contemporary Essays (edited by Grime and Nadasdy)*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 2001)

D. *Preach The Gospel* by Balge, Gerlach, (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1982) .

E. *Preach The Word*, bimonthly periodical by WELS Commission on Worship, Milwaukee, WI.

F. *Preaching Today*: monthly sermon cassette audiotapes produced by Christianity Today featuring some of the best Evangelical preachers; call 1-800-806-7798

G. *The Word Goes On: Sermons by Dr. Siegbert W. Becher*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1992).

### III. DRAMAS & READER'S THEATER

A. "A Christmas Meditation by a Modern Skeptic" a dramatic reading with hymn verses from "Once Again My Heart Rejoices" interspersed (attached)

B. "Another Christmas Carol" a Reader's Theater written by Rev. Brian Hagler (attached)

C. "Out of Darkness - Into the Light" a dramatic Scripture reading written by Anne Hansen, Madison, Wisconsin, 2002. (attached)

D. Drama Sketches Catalog: Willow Creek Resources (Zondervan Direct Source, 1-800-876-7335

E. Drama resources: [www.willowcreek.com](http://www.willowcreek.com) or 1-800-570-9812

### IV. SERMONS

A. "Grab The Sword, and Let's Go" – a first person narrative of Eshchol from Genesis 14, written by Prof. Mark Zarling, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. (attached)

B. "I Have A Dream" by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. on August 28, 1963 (attached)

C. "Remember Martin Rinkart" – a I Thessalonians 5:18 narrative Thanksgiving sermon by Rev. Thomas Trapp (attached)

D. Sermons on the Web: [www.sermoncentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com) (the largest sermon resource on earth...there's even a WELS pastor who has his sermons printed in "Sermon Central" – a great opportunity to witness!)

E. "Stairway To Heaven" – a sermon on Genesis 28 interweaving a contemporary song (attached)

**THE ART OF LISTENING TO A SERMON  
(homiletics 101)**

**a Bible study  
to receive input on sermons  
to evaluate the biblical purpose and structure of a sermon  
to help listen more profitably**

**Leader's Guide  
&  
Participant Manuscript**



## II. THE PURPOSE & CONTENT OF PREACHING

1. LUKE 4:43 - "I MUST PREACH THE GOOD NEWS...THAT IS WHY I WAS SENT"-Jesus
2. MARK 1:14,15 -
3. 2 TIMOTHY 3:16,17 -
4. ROMANS 15:4 -
5. I CORINTHIANS 1:22-24 (also Rom 1:16) -
6. I CORINTHIANS 9:16 -
7. II TIMOTHY 4:2 -
8. EPHESIANS 4:15 - Always speak the truth IN LOVE

## III. TYPES OF SERMONS

1. EXPOSITORY sermons expose/present/expound on a specific biblical text
  - a. Analytic-follows the natural divisions of the text in their natural order  
(e.g., Mt 5:1-12 Beatitudes sermon "Blessed are...")
  - b. Synthetic-rearranges the text to drive home the point being made  
(e.g., I Cor 5:18-21 The Ministry of Reconciliation)

Note: These texts are often taken from a PERICOPE - an appointed "section" of the Bible to be read and or preached on a Sunday during the Church Year. The oldest known pericope system in the Western Church is credited to Jerome (c.400 A.D.). The Roman Ordo became regularly used by Charlesmagne's time (c. 800 A.D.). Other pericopes have been developed since then including the one our Lutheran church body uses (ILCW 3 year cycle).

### 2. TOPICAL

THANKSGIVING, EASTER SUNDAY, WEDDING, FUNERAL,  
SERIES: e.g., "When God Builds a Church" "Ethics: Abortion, Capital Punishment,..."

### 3. NARRATIVE

AN EVERY DAY LIFE STORY with a biblical truth being driven home  
(e.g., 11-18-01 sermon "Remember Martin Rinkart")

### 4. HOMILY

A cursory exposition of a sermon text, usually with a general theme but without a formal outline (e.g., Wednesday Vespers talks)

#### IV. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. It has been said that historically Lutherans preach more inspirational sermons and Reformed more instructional sermons. True or not, what should a sermon be:  
INSPIRATIONAL OR INSTRUCTIONAL?

2. What are YOUR THOUGHTS about a sermon using the following to drive home a truth...

a. VISUALS

(powerpoint, movie clips, paintings...)

b. AUDIO

(music, like "Stairway to Heaven" by Led Zeppelin when preaching on Jacob's Ladder or "What If God Were One of Us" by Joan Osborne when preaching on Advent; or spoken messages)

c. DRAMA

(dramatic readings, short dramas) Remember, good drama raises questions and does not give answers. If they give answers they come off stiff. The sermon/epilogue is to give answers.

d. A SPECIAL QUESTION relating to drama and visual aids: Some people criticize long sermons. Is there a purpose for a LONG SERMON? (Pastor Chworowsky and the apostle Paul have an answer in Acts 20:7-12 Look for the incredible drama and visual aid!)

#### V. EVALUATE A BIBLICAL SERMON

As you read Peter's sermon on Pentecost in Acts 2:14-41, along the way ask yourself the questions: Where is the sermon...

INSTRUCTIONAL(biblically educational)?

INSPIRATIONAL (spiritually moving)?

INTERACTIVE(involve the listeners)?

RELIABLE (come off biblically credible)?

HEARTFUL (genuine/authentic)?

*"Words which come from the heart...  
...enter the heart."*



# THE ART OF LISTENING TO A SERMON (homiletics 101)

Rev. Thomas H. Trapp 2-17-02

## ---LEADER'S GUIDE---

READ first paragraph p.31 (Cherry Log sermons), then "GOD'S TROMBONES" The Judgment Day by James Weldon Johnson, a black preacher from a 1927 sermon

PRAYER on opening our hearts to hear the preaching of God's Word

### CHURCH BULLETIN BLOOPERS?

+ "The Rev. Merriweather spoke briefly, much to the delight of the congregation."

+ "The pastor will preach his farewell message, after which the choir will sing, "Break Forth in Joy."

+ "Today's Order of Service:

Hymn 604: "Great God, What Do I See and Hear?"

Preacher: The Rev. Horace Hooker

Hymn 60 "Hark, an awful voice is sounding!"

HOMILETICS is a seminary course that addresses the preparation and delivery of sermons. It comes from the Latin word "homilia" which means "CONVERSATION." That word is used to describe the theological struggle of the Emmaus disciples ("Did Jesus arise?", Lk 24) and the preaching of Paul at Troas (he preached until midnight, Ac 20).

THE PURPOSE of this Bible Study is to get your input on what you are looking for in a sermon and evaluate the biblical purpose and structure of a sermon to help you listen more profitably.

### I. YOUR THOUGHTS ON 21st CENTURY PREACHING IN OUR CHURCHES...

1.. What are the STRENGTHS of preaching in our churches?

2. What are the WEAKNESSES of preaching in our churches?

### II. WHAT I EXPECT FROM A 21st CENTURY SERMON...

1. List the QUALITIES of a GOOD sermon...

2. List the QUALITIES of a POOR sermon...

## II. THE PURPOSE & CONTENT OF PREACHING

1. LUKE 4:43 - "I MUST PREACH THE GOOD NEWS...THAT IS WHY I WAS SENT"  
-Jesus
2. MARK 1:14,15 - Jesus went about proclaiming the GOOD NEWS. "The time has come, the kingdom of God is near. REPENT and BELIEVE the Good News."  
(Law & Gospel: Rom 3:20 -"through the law we become conscious of sin" Rom 1:16-gospel=salvation)
3. 2 TIMOTHY 3:16,17 - "All Scripture is God-breathed and is USEFUL for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness." -"thoroughly quipped for every good work"
4. ROMANS 15:4 - The "encouragement"(Gk, paraklasis-COMFORT) of Scripture gives us HOPE!
5. I CORINTHIANS 1:22-24 (also Rom 1:16) - Preaching Christ crucified is the POWER and WISDOM of GOD! (although to the world it's "foolishness"). It SAVES those who believe!
  
6. I CORINTHIANS 9:16 - WOE TO ME IF I DO NOT PREACH THE GOSPEL! "[PAUL] IS MY CHOSEN INSTRUMENT TO CARRY MY NAME BEFORE THE GENTILES AND THEIR KINGS AND BEFORE THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL." -the Lord to Ananias at Paul's conversion (Acts 9:15)
  
7. II TIMOTHY 4:2 - PREACH THE WORD! Be ready to preach at all times and places!
8. EPHESIANS 4:15 - Always speak the truth IN LOVE

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d. A SPECIAL QUESTION relating to drama and visual aids: Some people criticize long sermons. Is there a purpose for a LONG SERMON? (Pastor Chworowsky and the apostle Paul have an answer in Acts 20:7-12)

EUTYCHUS falls asleep during a long sermon. Falls out a window and dies. Peter raises him from the dead! DRAMA & a Visual aid!

#### V. EVALUATE A BIBLICAL SERMON

1. As you read Peter's sermon on Pentecost in Acts 2:14-41, along the way ask yourself the questions: Where is the sermon...

INSTRUCTIONAL(educationa)? v.16

INSPIRATIONAL(moving)? v.37

INTERACTIONAL(involvement with listeners)? v.37

RELIABLE (credible)? quotes OT

HEARTFUL (genuine/authentic)?entire sermon!



From "God's Trombones"  
by James Weldon Johnson,  
a 1927 sermon

The Judgment  
is  
coming

In that great day,  
People, in that great day,  
God's a-going to rain down fire.  
God's a-going to sit in the middle of the air  
To judge the quick and the dead.

Early one of these mornings,  
God's a-going to call for Gabriel,  
That tall, bright angel, Gabriel;  
And God's a-going to say to him: Gabriel,  
Blow your silver trumpet,  
And wake the living nations.

And Gabriel's going to ask him: Lord,  
How loud must I blow it?

And God's a-going to tell him: Gabriel,  
Blow it calm and easy.  
Then putting one foot on the mountain top,  
And the other in the middle of the sea,  
Gabriel's going to stand and blow his horn,  
To wake the living nations.

Then God's a-going to say to him: Gabriel,  
Once more blow your silver trumpet,  
And wake the nations underground.

And Gabriel's going to ask him: Lord  
How loud must I blow it?  
And God's a-going to tell him: Gabriel,  
Like seven peals of thunder.  
Then the tall, bright angel, Gabriel,  
Will put one foot on the battlements of heaven  
And the other on the steps of hell,  
And blow that silver trumpet  
Till he shakes old hell's foundations.

And I feel Old Earth a-shuddering —  
And I see the graves a-bursting —  
And I hear a sound,  
A blood-chilling sound.  
What sound is that I hear?  
It's the clicking together of the dry bones,  
Bone to bone — the dry bones.  
And I see coming out of the bursting graves,  
And marching up from the valley of death,  
The army of the dead.

And the living and the dead in the twinkling of an eye  
Are caught up in the middle of the air,  
Before God's judgment bar.

Oh-o-oh, sinner,  
Where will you stand,  
In that great day when God's a-going to rain down fire?  
Oh, you gambling man — where will you stand?  
You whore-mongering man — where will you stand?  
Liars and backsliders — where will you stand,  
In that great day when God's a-going to rain down fire?

And God will divide the sheep from the goats,  
The one on the right, the other on the left.  
And to them on the right God's a-going to say:  
Enter into my kingdom.  
And those who've come through great tribulations,  
And washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb,  
They will enter in —  
Clothed in spotless white,  
With starry crowns upon their heads,  
And silver slippers on their feet,  
And harps within their hands;—

And two by two they'll walk  
Up and down the golden street,  
Feasting on the milk and honey  
Singing new songs of Zion,  
Chattering with the angels  
All around the Great White Throne.

And to them on the left God's a-going to say:  
Depart from me into everlasting darkness,  
Down into the bottomless pit.

And the wicked, like lumps of lead will start to fall,  
Headlong for seven days and nights they'll fall,  
Plumb into the big, black, red-hot mouth of hell,  
Belching out fire and brimstone.

And their cries like howling, yelping dogs,  
Will go up with the fire and smoke from hell,  
But God will stop his ears.

Too late, sinner! Too late!  
Good-bye, sinner! Good-bye!  
In hell, sinner! In hell!  
Beyond the reach of the love of God.

And I hear a voice, crying, crying:  
Time shall be no more!  
Time shall be no more!  
Time shall be no more!  
And the sun will go out like a candle in the wind,  
The moon will turn to dripping blood,  
The stars will fall like cinders,  
And the sea will burn like tar;  
And the earth shall melt away and be dissolved,  
And the sky will roll up like a scroll.  
With a wave of his hand God will blot out time,  
And start the wheel of eternity.

Sinner, oh, sinner,  
Where will you stand  
In that great day when God's a-going to rain down fire?

## STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES OF PREACHING IN WELS CHURCHES...

A FEW COMMENTS by students and members of Wisconsin Lutheran Chapel at UW-Madison at a February 17, 2002 Bible Study:

1. What are the STRENGTHS of preaching in our WELS churches?
  - +Impressed by and grateful for the educational background of our pastors (biblical languages and humanities)
  - +Commitment to preach God's word
  - +Law and Gospel based sermons
  - +The pastors actually believe what they preach
  - +Usage of the Church Year, it covers the whole will of God
  
2. What are the WEAKNESSES of preaching in our WELS churches?
  - +Need to challenge members with giving more of the financial gifts
  - +More real world terms and applications are needed
  - +Some sermons are too long
  - +Some sermons are too short
  - +Encourage the congregation to put their faith into action (e.g., physical help to the community)
  - +More joy is needed in sermons
  
3. What are the qualities of a GOOD sermon?
  - +Scripture references and usage
  - +Leads to self-examination
  - +Guidance on how to live a daily Christian life
  - +Touches intellect, emotion and will
  - +Witnesses to the non-Christian
  - +Has easy to follow flow, movement and organization
  - +Be accurate, be sincere and be seated
  - +Understandable and clear
  - +Ask: Did Christ have to be crucified to preach this sermon?
  
4. What are the qualities of a POOR sermon?
  - +Moves the listeners to condemn others (non-WELS...) and feel self-righteous
  - +Assumes everyone is from the same WELS background
  - +Promotes the speaker
  - +Too lengthy & boring repetition
  - +Personal agenda (keeps preaching on the same subject no matter what the text)

**DRAMATIC READING & READERS' THEATER  
MANUSCRIPTS**

**"A Christmas Meditation by a Modern Skeptic"  
(interspersed with a Christmas carol)**

**"Another Christmas Carol"  
(a Reader's Theater take-off on Dickens)**

**"Out of the Darkness - Into the Light"  
(a dramatic reading of Scripture)**



# A Christmas Meditation by a Modern Skeptic

*Once Again My Heart Rejoices, Christian Worship #37 (WORDS)*  
*(use CW 428 melody)*

Based on: The Remarkable Christmas Meditation of a Modern Man  
by Anna Martina Gottschick

Freely translated, Prof. Paul E. Eickmann

Adapted to worship service, Rev. Thomas H. Trapp

The wonder of Christmas? Ha! What a suggestion!  
For me all of that stuff is out of the question.  
Let children enjoy it; it's for them, to my mind,  
And for people like foolish old women -- that kind.  
A Christmas tree? I've nothing against it.  
But my children have walked through the soles of their shoes,  
So get busy, mister! What's the good news?

Once again my heart rejoices  
As I hear  
Far and near  
Sweetest angel voices.  
"Christ is born!" their choirs are singing  
Till the air  
Everywhere  
Now with joy is ringing.

I hear nothing at all. In our modern ears  
Sound sirens and motors and shifting gears.  
Talk about angels is way out of line --  
We're *in* the twenty-first century, a different time.  
We've seen war, felt the earth shake under our feet.  
All this talk about "peace on earth" among men --  
Just look around: they're fighting again.

Hear! The conqueror has spoken:  
"Now the foe,  
Sin and woe,  
Death and hell are broken!"  
God is man, man to deliver,  
And the Son  
Now is one  
With our blood forever.

God -- I suppose He's somewhere around;  
But mostly today (at least so I've found)  
You can hardly discover Him, look where you may,  
Not that I blame Him for hiding away.  
Does God know there's suffering  
and heartache, as well he should?  
And if He did know, could He do any good?

Should we still fear God's displeasure,  
Who, to save,  
Freely gave  
His most precious treasure?  
To redeem us he has given  
His own Son  
From the throne  
Of his might in heaven.

God is so great, far away up on high.  
Aren't there a billion stars in the sky?  
How could He be concerned about us  
As he watches us kick the world into dust?  
He can hardly get much joy from the sight.  
Our world doesn't give Him much glory, I fear.  
He'd best keep His distance; no room for Him here!

Softly from his lowly manger  
Jesus calls  
One and all,  
"You are safe from danger.  
Children, from the sins that grieve you  
You are freed;  
All you need  
I will surely give you."

And what if it's true, the often-told story  
Of angels, and shepherds who saw the Lord's glory  
And went to find a new-born Child  
Laid in a manger, gentle and mild?  
God not far away, but laid on the hay --  
What if we'd pack up our sorrow and fear  
And take it to him -- if God is so near?

Come, then, banish all your sadness!  
One and all,  
Great and small,  
Come with songs of gladness;  
We shall live with him forever  
There on high  
In that joy  
Which will vanish never.

Farmers and printers, workers and preachers,  
Students, machinists, and algebra teachers,  
Ditch-diggers, home-makers, doctors and bakers,  
Accountants, dog-catchers, children, watchmakers --  
Our God is here, for everyone near?  
People, you people, come with me and sing;  
God lies in the manger, our Savior and King!

**“ANOTHER CHRISTMAS CAROL”**  
A Reader's Theater that presents the real meaning  
of Christmas!

Written by Rev. Brian Douglas Hagler of Macomb, IL  
adapted by Thomas H. Trapp

# Reader's Theater

"ANOTHER CHRISTMAS CAROL"

December 20, 1998 (also 12-1-96) (PULPIT  
MANUSCRIPT)

Matthew 1:21

Rev. Thomas H. Trapp, Madison, Wisconsin

"Another  
Christmas  
Carol"

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INTRODUCTION TO THE READERS' THEATER:

"What does Christmas MEAN to YOU?"

That is a question people are asked at this time of year.

Some answer: "Christmas means FAMILY/COOKIES/PRESENTS, LOTS OF PRESENTS/HOME FOR THE HOLIDAY/PARTIES/VACATION/GIVING, GIVING WITHOUT EXPECTING RETURN!"

---

In the 19th century, English novelist Charles Dickens (1812-1870) wrote a play that has become a LANDMARK for the MEANING of Christmas!

The play is called: "A CHRISTMAS CAROL."

His classic play INTRODUCES us to the KINDNESS of Bob Cratchit and the SELFISHNESS of Ebenezer Scrooge and the EERIENESS of Jacob Marley and the GOD-BLESS-US-EVERYONE of Tiny Tim.

Dickens' play INTRODUCES us to all these CHARACTERS and CONTINUES to TOUCH us and the hearts of millions of Americans at this time of year.

It touches us Americans with what many call the MEANING of Christmas: a time for GIVING, not taking and a time to be GENEROUS, not filled with selfishness.

This is seen by MANY as the TRUE MEANING of Christmas.

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Do we as CHRISTIANS have any MORAL OBJECTIONS to this meaning of Christmas or "A Christmas Carol?"

Of course not. The MORAL TEACHING of being GENEROUS and GIVING is CRUCIAL in a world caught up in selfishness and greed!

The play "A Christmas Carol" offers a GOOD MESSAGE of MORALITY that we need to hear!

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However, "A Christmas Carol" DOES MISS the CENTRAL message of Christianity and what CHRISTMAS is all about!

Mr. Kerwin Steffen and I now present to you the REAL MEANING of Christmas in a Reader's Theater entitled: "ANOTHER CHRISTMAS CAROL." It begins where Charles Dickens' play ends.

## Another "Christmas Carol"

*(Note: the bracketed areas are not read)*

STEFFEN: Bob Cratchit was turning down the vent on the new coal stove in his office. the temperature was quite comfortable, but Mr. Scrooge always seemed to think Bob needed it warmer, and so they had begun a ritual.

TRAPP: Every time Ebenezer came into Cratchit's office, he would open the vent, asking if Bob was warm enough. Bob would reply, "Yes," and Ebenezer would throw more coal in the stove anyway. What a difference from the old miser who used to make him account for every nugget of coal burned.

STEFFEN: The change that had come over Cratchit's employer during the last Yuletide was unbelievable, and Bob had had a hard time adjusting to it.

TRAPP: Even so, over the course of the next few months, Ebenezer and Bob had become close friends, and Ebenezer had confided in Bob about his extraordinary visit from his old partner, Jacob Marley, and the three spirits.

STEFFEN: "Cratchit!" bellowed Scrooge. Bob came into Scrooge's office to find him happily counting gold sovereigns. "Ah, there you are, Bob," said Ebenezer. "You know what tomorrow is, don't you, Bob?"

TRAPP: "Yes, sir," [Cratchit replied.] "It's Christmas Eve."

STEFFEN: "I suppose you will be wanting tomorrow off," [said Ebenezer in a gruff voice.]

TRAPP: "Well, no , sir," [said Bob.] "We've never taken Christmas Eve off before. I was, though, hoping to be off on Christmas Day."

STEFFEN: "Well, nothing doing, [said Scrooge.] "You'll take tomorrow *and* Christmas off, or else!" [Scrooge sat back in his chair and chuckled like a little child.]

TRAPP: "You *will* be coming for Christmas dinner, won't you...Ebenezer?"  
[asked Bob.]

STEFFEN: "Wouldn't miss it for the world, my boy! Now come here!"

Ebenezer took a stack of gold sovereigns that he had been counting and handed them to Bob.

"Please accept this as a small token of my appreciation for all your hard work over the last year, Bob."

TRAPP: Cratchit had learned over the last 12 months not to reject a gift from his boss. He never won one of those arguments, and it gave the old man such joy. So Bob profusely thanked his boss.

STEFFEN: "Now you run along home, Bob," [said Ebenezer.] "I'll close up shop today. It's 6 o'clock--high time you went home to that family of yours."

TRAPP: Scrooge locked up his office an hour early and took his dinner at a little dining establishment down the street. He had been considering asking the widow who ran the eatery if she would consider attending the theater some evening with him, but so far his courage had failed him, so he contented himself with having his dinner there about once a week.

STEFFEN: After a very satisfying supper, he went home, tired from a long day. He poured himself a brandy, crawled into bed, and began reading *A Tale of Two Cities*. He had been trying to get through the book for weeks, and he had just a few more pages to go. Soon into his reading--when he came upon the line, "'Tis a far, far better thing I do than I have ever done,"--the lamp by his bed suddenly started to flicker. Then a cold wind rushed through the room, filling Ebenezer with a terrible dread.

TRAPP: Materializing before him, looking much worse than he had last year, was his old partner, Jacob Marley. He still wore the heavy chain around his body, his voice was still the same, but it seemed centuries older.

[In an eerie voice,] "Ebenezer," [said the apparition.]

STEFFEN: Scrooge needed no convincing this time around that it was Marley: "Jacob, why have you come? I have changed! Really, I have! I know how to keep Christmas now. I know the joy of Christmas and the fulfillment that comes from helping others. Ask anyone. Ask Bob Cratchit, for heaven's sake, Why have you come back to haunt me yet again?"

TRAPP: Marley shook his chain. [In an eerie voice,] "Ebenezer, Ebenezer. Do you remember my chain--the one I forged my whole life long with my greed, my heartlessness and my sins? I told you that my chain was but a small one compared with yours. *And your chain still grows.* You can't stop it with your generosity or with your good deeds. As good as these things are, your chain still grows, for you do not know the One who can destroy your chain and stop its endless forging in the furnaces of hell."

"Tonight," [he continued,] "you will be visited by a great spirit. He will show you not only the how of Christmas, but also the why of Christmas and, most important, the Who of Christmas."

STEFFEN: And with that, the apparition vanished. scrooge lay back on his bed, shocked. He though he'd been doing so *well!* He has helped Tiny Tim get his operation, he contributed to lots of charities, and he had discovered the joy of giving.

"What more could I need?" [he wondered.]

TRAPP: Just then, the spirit appeared. His countenance was like lightening, his clothes like snow, his voice like a great waterfall.

[In a strong voice,] "Come," [he said.]

Ebenezer was greatly afraid, but he knew better than to disobey, so out into the night they swept. As they flew across the English Channel, the years began to recede. Then decades. By the time they were over eastern Europe, whole centuries were passing by in reverse. As they



overflowed Greece and the eastern Mediterranean, they were 1,000 years into the past. And by the time they crossed over into Palestine, almost twice that many years had retreated.

STEFFEN: They stood on an ancient city street. A man and a woman were talking to a man at an inn, and the innkeeper was leading them out of the main streets to a small cave, a grotto on the outskirts of town, that had been converted into a stable. The night was very cold. The innkeeper lit a fire at the entrance to the cave and went off. Now Ebenezer realized that the young woman was significantly pregnant. In fact, from the alternating looks of pain and relief on her face, he discerned that she must be in labor, although he had never actually seen a woman in labor before.

“Who *are* these people?” Scrooge asked the spirit.

TRAPP: [In a strong voice,] “Be quiet,” [the spirit commanded.] “This is not the time to speak. It is a time to marvel in awe and reverence.”

Soon there was the sound of crying. The father and mother were crying, and so was their newborn Son. The mother wrapped the baby in a blanket. She let him nurse for a while and then, when He fell asleep, she laid him in a feeding trough that her husband had turned into a makeshift baby bed.

STEFFEN: [Suddenly Scrooge exclaimed,] “It’s Jesus! We’ve been watching the birth of Jesus!”

TRAPP: The spirit nodded.

STEFFEN: “But spirit, what are those things around the little One? I can’t quite make out what they are. They seem to be wrapped all around Him.

TRAPP: The spirit did not answer. [He said only,] “It is time to go from here.” After that the scene melted quickly and was just as quickly replaced by a dark street where two men were talking.

STEFFEN: Scrooge could not see their faces, but every so often, when one of them moved, he thought he could hear the sound of metal clanking against itself and against the stones of the street.

TRAPP: [In a deep professional voice,] "We know you are a teacher sent from God," one of the men said.

[In a caring voice,] the other replied, "I tell you the truth, Nicodemus, a man cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven unless he is born from above."

"How can a man enter a second time into his mother's womb?" asked Nicodemus.

"That which is born of flesh is flesh; that which is born of spirit is spirit," the other replied. "Whoever is not born of water and the spirit cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven. For God did not send His own Son into the world to condemn the world, but that through Him the world might be saved."

STEFFEN: Again the scene shifted. It was lighter, but not much. A cold wind blew, and Scrooge could see that they stood on a hilltop near a city. When he turned, he went white with terror and revulsion. A small group of soldiers stood around a scaffolding as a crowd of people watched three men being crucified. Scrooge winced as the Man in the middle was nailed in place.

Recovering his composure, he asked the spirit, "We're standing on Golgotha, aren't we? We're witnessing the death of Christ!"

TRAPP: [In a strong voice,] "Yes," [said the spirit.]

STEFFEN: "What are those things wrapped around Christ? They look like the same things I saw in the manger. I think they're the things I heard rattling in the street when He was talking to Nicodemus."

TRAPP: The spirit looked at Ebenezer and said, "Why don't you move in closer?"

STEFFEN: "...I don't want to," [stammered Scrooge.]

TRAPP: "You *must*," [insisted the spirit.]

STEFFEN: "I can't," [said Ebenezer.]

TRAPP: "You *will*," [said the spirit.] And with that, the spirit took Scrooge's hand and dragged him toward the cross and the Man hanging there.

At the foot of the cross, the spirit turned Scrooge's head upward, and he saw. He saw what was wrapped around the baby in the manger. He saw what he heard clanking in the street. He saw the chain of his own sins wrapped cruelly around the body of the Son of God!!

STEFFEN: "I cannot bear it!" Scrooge [cried, and he] fell to the ground, burying his face in his arms.

TRAPP: "No, you could not," [said the spirit.] "That is why He bore it."

And when Scrooge looked up, the bodies were gone, as were the soldiers and the crowd. But there, still hanging on the cross, was the chain of Scrooge's sin. And in a moment, the chain became dust that blew away in the wind.

STEFFEN: "How can I *live* now, spirit?" [asked Scrooge.] "How can I *live* now that I know it was the chain of my own sins that sent Him to the cross?"

TRAPP: [In a strong voice,] "You cannot live," [said the spirit.] "That is why Ebenezer must die--die to sin! He must die, so that the One who did this for you, and for the whole world, may give you new life.

"That is why you were baptized--that you may drown and die to sin--with Him, and then live a new life with Him. Look there!"

The spirit pointed to a nearby garden. And Ebenezer Scrooge saw Jesus--risen from the dead and victorious; for He broke the chain of sin, death and the power of the devil. And Jesus carried in His arms an infant, born only moments ago.

STEFFEN: "Who is the child?" [asked Scrooge.]

TRAPP: "His name--is Ebenezer," [said the spirit.]

STEFFEN: Now Ebenezer Scrooge understood fully the meaning of

Christmas. He was no longer bothered by his old partner, Jacob Marley, or by any other strange spirits. From that day on, Ebenezer knew that Jesus Christ had been born into the world and had carried his, Ebenezer Scrooge's, sins to the cross.

TRAPP: Now Ebenezer knew the real meaning of Christmas. It was about Jesus who came into the world to save sinners from their sins. When Ebenezer woke up, he put down *A Tale of Two Cities* and read the Gospel of Matthew--the part where an angel of the Lord said in a dream to Joseph: "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name *Jesus*, because he will save his people from their sins."

STEFFEN: Ebenezer Scrooge continued to be generous and joyful, but for a whole new reason. He discovered Jesus was the reason for the season.

{Author: Rev. Brian Douglas Hagler of Macomb, IL. Adapted}

# Dramatic Scripture Reading

1 of 2

**Out of the Darkness – Into the Light** (John 8:12, Romans 13:12, I Peter 2:9)

for three readers  
arranged by Anne Hansen

(3 Readers)

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1 Jesus spoke to the people and said:

2 "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me  
3 *the light of the world*

---

1 *walk in darkness*

2 will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

3 *follow me!* *You will have the light of life!*

---

1 Therefore, we must stand watch, for the night is nearly over and the day is almost here.

2 *almost here*

3

---

1 *put on the armor of light!*

2 *put aside the deeds of darkness*

3 So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

---

1

2 *Why* must we put on the armor of light?

3 We must equip ourselves as a chosen people, a

---

1 *We belong to God!*

2 We do this

3 royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.

---

---

1

2 that we may **declare the praises** of him who called us out of the darkness into his

3

*out of the darkness*

---

1

Come out of the darkness!

2

wonderful light!

3

God has called you out of darkness!

---

1

Enter his wonderful light!

2

Enter his wonderful light!

3

Enter his wonderful light!

---

"Out of Darkness-Into The Light"  
by Anne Hansen, Madison, Wisconsin

## **SAMPLE SERMONS**

**A First Person Narrative Sermon  
("Grab the Sword and Let's Go")**

**An Involving, Engaging & Captivating Sermon  
("I Have A Dream")**

**A Narrative Thanksgiving Sermon  
("Remember Martin Rinkart")**

**A Sermon Using a Contemporary Song  
("Stairway to Heaven")**

"GRAB THE SWORD, AND LET'S GO!"

(a narrative sermon by Prof. Mark B. Zarling)

*Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. Endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.*

Gen 14:13-24

SEW District P/T conf, 6/12/01

Dear soldiers of the cross and victors through that cross!

I told my brothers my worries. I thought they were crazy. I mean being a friend is one thing. Lending a hand I can agree to – but this? I just don't know. But Mamre and Aner told me to quite whining. GRAB THE SWORD, AND LET'S GO they said. Looking back on it, what an experience. I'll never forget it. Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't introduce myself. My name is Eshchol. You've probably never heard of me, but that's alright. I'm not all that important, but what I learned on that commando raid are truths never to be forgotten. My brothers and I learned them from that Hebrew Abram. The events of that day dashed any further doubts or worries I had. Being allies with Abram meant we were allies with Abram's God, and wow, what a God! I want to introduce you to Abram and his God. Listen to Eshchol for a change, and get ready for action. You have struggles and battles to fight for Abram's God. So GRAB THE SWORD AND GO! Why are you waiting around? When it comes to rescuing people, I. A delay is unthinkable. And don't worry, for II. The odds are unbeatable. And when it is all said and done, III. The results are unbelievable.

I.

A delay is unthinkable

My brothers and I came to know Abram when he pitched his camp close to our trees. Our first impression was quite favorable. This foreigner was a wealthy man, and we figured it never hurts to develop some fat-cat friends. But the more we got to know about Abram, we saw that he was far more than just a rich shepherd. He built an altar almost in our backyard. He openly called upon his God. He never hid the fact that he worshiped someone called Jahweh. And what a different type of God than the one we learned about around Amorite campfires. Abram told us about a God who gives, not some god who takes. Abram talks about a God of faithful love, not a vindictive god who delights in troubling humans. He actually talks about a living God who has a master plan, a plan to send a Rescuer, someone who would be a blessing to all nations. Abram told us that even though we were Amorites, God loved us as well. We too would be blessed in this special descendant whom God would send to rescue us from troubles and fears. Of course, we had our doubts. Abram didn't even have a son yet, and he wasn't getting any younger. Still, he reminded us that God wouldn't lie. Since seeing is believing, Mamre and Aner and I decided to wait and see.

What we saw was a man who lived this trust in a God who rescues. When Lot was taken captive Abram didn't hesitate. As soon as the fugitive delivered the tragic news, Abram took action. No Amorite attitudes in Abram. I mean, Abram didn't hold grudges. Seemed to me that Lot had pretty well stiffed Abram in the whole land deal. Then Lot,



even though raised by Abram almost as a step-son after Haran died, seemed to drift farther and farther away from his uncle. There he was living the high life in Sodom. But Abram didn't hold the past against Lot. Immediately he called out his servants and went in pursuit. Time is of the essence Abram said. Each hour of delay allows the captives to be dragged farther and farther away into captivity. He grabbed the sword and went. We had come to know and trust this Abram, so our swords were his. His urgency lit a fire to our sandals, and did we make time.

Now listen, I'm just an Amorite. You guys are sons of Abraham. After all, your Scripture says **those who believe are children of Abraham**. Do you have the same sense of urgency that your spiritual daddy had? Do you publicly build your family altar and clearly tell your neighbors that the God you worship is different than the fake gods of a spiritually wishy-washy society? Or when is the last time you went on a rescue mission? Don't tell me you don't know a Lot who is in trouble. Look at your family. Look at your church family. That nephew who is slipping away from word and sacrament - each day of delay is one more step farther away from a Savior who loves him and one step closer to Satan who devours him. When is the last time your board of elders said nuts to a meeting, let's get in the car and go, let's grab the phone and talk. There are people in danger of slavery, captivity, and ultimate death. And I've learned that there is a fate worse than dying, it is the eternal death that awaits one who dies apart from Abram's God. Time is of the essence. Your Scripture says, **Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation**. What are we sitting around for? Look at this household of Abram before me, this army of God. Grab the sword and go. Instead of sitting tomorrow, what would happen if we went from tent to tent throughout the campground of Kenosha and rescued people from fear and confusion and the slavery of sin.

Of course, some think the odds are too great. We don't have the forces. We're so few, and the scoffers are so many. We don't have the weapons. Take it from Eshchol again, I learned that day. Abram not only had a sense of urgency, he had a God-given sense of confidence. Let's go. In his mind,

II. the odds were unbeatable.

Kedorlaomer and his boys had been in town before. In fact, they had subdued the whole area. Twelve long years of tribute. But then a few kings southeast of us decided enough was enough. Talk about instant retaliation. The very next year Kedorlaomer was back, and the fearsome foursome struck with a vengeance. The whole region, from northwest of us, way down to the gulf, and then around to the west, everyone defeated. The noose just tightened and tightened until the fickle five were cut off and outgunned. I'll be honest with you, I thought initially we were crazy to go after the kings from the north. I mean Abram might be wealthy and could equip an army of 318, and we Amorite brothers had some resources, but what is that against 4 kings who could sustain and support an extended military campaign hundreds and hundreds of miles from their home base. I was nervous.

Abram sure wasn't. He was confident of victory. He was confident he could go into battle and not be killed. Simply amazing. Not that Abram had a death wish, but he had

promises. God told him **I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. Whoever curses you I will curse; all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.** Abram honestly took God at his word: a great nation from my loins; a Savior from my line to be a blessing for all nations. Since I don't have a son yet, Abram thought, God is not finished with me. I cannot die until those promises are kept. God is on my side, I'm a winner.

Sons of Abram, you have even more than the promises. You know the full picture. You have seen the Seed of Abraham born of the virgin. You have learned that the Christ is the crusher of the ancient serpent. You celebrate that Jesus as the captain of salvation. You have seen this Jesus go to war for you, a deadly war in the wilderness when he went toe to toe against Satan, and defeated him. You have seen this Jesus walk through death itself and come out victorious. You have learned that this Jesus brought peace through his blood, a blessing to all peoples on earth. Sons of Abram, what are you waiting for. Do you feel outnumbered by a wicked and hostile society? Do you feel pressured by the assaults of temptations and doubt? Grab the sword, and go. Pull out the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, and remember that **if God be for us, who can be against us.** Attack, attack with the Word of life, for **the gates of Hades cannot prevail against the church.** Grab the sword and go. That sword of the spirit is a rapier that rips up the excuses we are quick to offer and leaves the ugliness of our sin exposed. "I'm too busy." That sword cuts it up and reveals my sin of laziness. "I don't have the gifts for that." The sword exposes my lack of faith that the God who called me also equips me to serve in that call. Yet that sword is soft enough to wipe away the tears of repentance. The sword of the Spirit reminds me: **The Lord will fight for you, you need only to be still.** That sword of the spirit cuts through the chains of confusion and frees us from doubt and fear. Then sword of the spirit cuts the swath of victory. Through holy baptism you stand victorious in the Savior, with the weapon of the Word at which the forces of hell tremble. Grab the sword and go. Use the Word of life and attack your personal sins and demons. Attack the apathy and apostasy of a complacent nation or a comfortable congregation. With God on our side, we cannot lose. The odds are unbeatable. So what are we waiting for? Souls are at stake!

And watch what God does. Abram is a warrior who comes home, not as a triumphant conqueror, but a humble and grateful soldier. Grab the sword and go, for

III. the results are unbelievable

The route was short-lived. Ked and the boys won't be back anytime soon. We chased them 50 miles past Damascus. Abram, more importantly Abram's God, won such a one-sided victory that Lot was rescued, the women and the other people, even all the goods. It felt like a victory parade all the way back. And Abram made sure we got our fair share. Yet what I remember most is not the booty, but the blessing. I won't forget that scene with the king. Oh, I don't mean the wimpy king of Sodom. Abram made clear to him that all credit goes to the Lord God, the Most High. I'm talking about that other king, the priest King Melchizedek. Melchizedek came out and proclaimed loudly for all to hear that God alone achieved the victory. God delivered the enemies into Abram's hand. Abram showed his gratitude by giving Melchizedek a tenth of all. What a lesson we learned that

day. Melchizedek worshipped the same God as Abram! Melchizedek, like Abram, knew that this God is a victorious God. We learned clearly that this God had plans for Abram. If only all those people would listen closely and carefully.

Sons of Abram, look at the unbelievable results you see daily. You've met the eternal Melchizedek. Jesus is the king of righteousness, YOUR righteousness. Jesus is the king of peace, YOUR peace now and forever. Jesus is the eternal priest who daily intercedes for you. Celebrate the unbelievable results he brings. Each day there are victories that God gives to his people, victories that bring glory to God and comfort to his people. A baby is brought to life through the drowning of baptism. A hardened heart is cracked to sobbing repentance through the hammer of the law you wield. Those tears are dried through the salve of the Savior's love you share. Look for the victories in your own life, look for the victories in your own tents and towns. God wins, each time he wins, and the results are eternal. So GRAB THE SWORD, AND GO. A delay is unthinkable, the odds are truly unbeatable, and the results are unbelievable.

I've talked long enough, but you know what they say about an Amorite and his tongue. I'm just excited each time I think of what we witnessed that day. Yet I was supposed to read from the history!

Genesis 14:13ff

Amen



## Martin Luther King Day

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### I have a Dream

by *Martin Luther King, Jr.*

*Delivered on the steps at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. on August 28, 1963*

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity.

But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. So we have come here today to dramatize an appalling condition.

In a sense we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check -- a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God's children. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.

It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment and to underestimate the determination of the Negro. This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. Nineteen sixty-three is not an end, but a beginning. Those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.

But there is something that I must say to my people who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice. In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.

We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny and their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone.

And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.

I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state, sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama, whose governor's lips are presently dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring."

And if America is to be a great nation this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania!

Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado!

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California!

But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia!

Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee!

Let freedom ring from every hill and every molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

“REMEMBER MARTIN RINKART”

(PULPIT MANUSCRIPT)

I Thessalonians 5:16-18

(Narrative sermon)

11-18-01 (Thanksgiving Sunday)

Rev. Thomas H. Trapp, Madison, Wisconsin

GIVE THANKS to the Lord for he is good for his mercy endures forever!

TEXT: “BE JOYFUL ALWAYS; PRAY CONTINUALLY; GIVE THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES, FOR THIS IS GOD’S WILL FOR YOU IN CHRIST JESUS.”

PRAYER: I cannot see what life will bring today;  
How bountiful or barren it may be,  
Nor how the course of life in one swift stroke  
Can redirect and change its plan for me.  
But this I know: in all my daily living  
I turn to You, O God, with great thanksgiving.

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INTRODUCTION: Do you REMEMBER MARTIN RINKART? Few people do. He was born in Eilenberg, Germany in 1586, 40 years after Luther’s death. Rinkart was the son of a poor cooper, a man who made and repaired wooden barrels. At a young age, Martin attended Latin School in Eilenburg and learned music in Leipzig (the town that was later made famous by a man named Johann Sebastian Bach). Then, in 1602 Martin studied theology at the University of Leipzig and several years later he was ordained as a Lutheran pastor.

At the age of 24, Martin Rinkart was a candidate to be a pastor [deacon] in his hometown of Eilenburg. The Town Council wanted him, but the church Superintendent did not like him. So Rinkart went to Eisleben, the birthplace of Luther, and became a School Master there as well as a cantor and a pastoral assistant. Eventually, he also served two parishes on the outskirts of Eisleben.

It was no secret, Martin Rinkart dearly loved the Lord, but his heart was also touched by a young woman whose name was Christine, Christine Morgenstern. And in 1612, the two became “one in Christ.”

God had richly blessed Martin with a new wife --- and the skills of being a pastor, a musician and also a wonderful poet! --- He crafted poems so skillfully that he was declared the Poet Laureate of Eisleben in 1614! By the end of his life he wrote 66 poems. And Martin was thankful for all of God’s gifts to him.

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“GIVE THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES, for this is God’s will **for you** in Christ Jesus.”

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Then came the year 1617.

It was a very good year in the life of Martin Rinkart.

The future looked bright for this young man. He was well-educated, a skilled musician, a gifted writer, a respected pastor and a happy husband of his dear Christine.

1617 was a good year for him. It was the centennial of the Reformation. 100 years earlier Martin Luther pounded the 95 theses on the Wittenberg door and the Reformation began. To commemorate the 100th Anniversary of the Reformation, Martin Rinkart wrote and produced seven dramas based on the events and the people of the Reformation.

What a joy it was for him, as a Lutheran pastor, during the year of the Reformation's centennial, to minister to God's people in Eisleben, Germany -- the very town where Martin Luther was born.

1617 was a good year for Martin Rinkart.

To top it off, in November of 1617, when Martin was 31 years old, the good folks of his hometown, Eilenburg Germany, now made him a candidate to be their head pastor. The church Superintendent did not object this time. So the people of Eilenburg asked Martin to come and to serve them with God's Word and Sacraments.

And he gladly went and gave thanks for his new calling.

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"GIVE THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCE, for this is God's will **for you** in Christ Jesus ."

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Ahhh, 1617. It was a very good year for Martin Rinkart!

But then the roof caved in.

In 1618 one of the most destructive conflicts in European history was just beginning. We know it today as the 30 Years War.

For 30 years warfare ravaged the land of Germany. It began as a religious war between the Protestants and the Catholics, but it ended up a political war.

During the 100 years after the death of Luther, the Roman Catholic Church had lost power and influence in Germany. As a result, violence was breaking out against the Protestants. Protestant churches in Germany were being destroyed and their rights to worship were being restricted. The Protestants appealed to the king for protection and guaranteed religious liberties. But the King was Catholic and would not listen. As a result, the Protestants developed a military, so did the Catholics. Finally in 1618 the Protestants revolted and the Revolution began! It led to economic decline, uncertainty, fear, disruption and daily brutality.

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And it all started in the first full year of Martin Rinkart's ministry in Eilenburg, Germany. Suddenly 1000s of peasants from miles around sought refuge in Eilenburg because it was a walled city. It soon became overcrowded. Then famine and a deadly plague hit the city, not once but twice. The people were so hard up for food that they ate dogs and cats.

By 1637, at the height of suffering and death, Rinkart was the only remaining minister in the town. The church Superintendent had left and the two other clergymen had died. He gave funeral rites to as many as 70 people a day and at the end of that year he buried nearly 4,500 people who died of the plague. His most difficult burial was that of his dear wife, Christine.

Official records show that in just two years, 8,000 people died in Eilenburg. Many were buried in trenches, without the benefit of a burial service.

It's like having the World Trade Center tragedy happen two years in a row, all in your town.

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And the apostle Paul says, "GIVE THANKS IN **ALL CIRCUMSTANCES**, for this is God's will **for you** in Christ Jesus."

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How could Martin Rinkart GIVE THANKS in the midst of all this HORROR?  
Where did he find any solid reason for giving thanks?  
He found it in the same place you and I find it --- in God's Word and Sacraments!

Martin knew the promise of Jesus in John 11 that "I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE, HE WHO BELIEVES IN ME WILL **LIVE**, EVEN THOUGH HE DIES;..." (v.25)

He knew the statement of faith by JOB, "THE LORD GAVE AND THE LORD HAS TAKEN AWAY, ---**BLESSED** --- BE THE NAME OF THE LORD." (1:21)

Martin Rinkart knew PSALM 42 "WHY ARE YOU DOWNCAST, O MY SOUL? WHY SO DISTURBED WITHIN ME? PUT YOUR **HOPE IN GOD**, FOR I WILL YET **PRAISE HIM**, MY SAVIOR AND MY GOD." (v.11)

He knew PSALM 69 "I AM IN PAIN AND DISTRESS; --- MAY YOUR SALVATION, O GOD, PROTECT ME. I WILL PRAISE GOD'S NAME IN SONG AND GLORIFY HIM WITH **THANKSGIVING**." (v.29)

And Martin Rinkart knew I Thessalonians 5 - "BE JOYFUL ALWAYS; PRAY CONTINUALLY; ---GIVE THANKS IN **ALL CIRCUMSTANCES**, ---FOR THIS IS GOD'S WILL **FOR YOU** IN CHRIST JESUS." (v. 16-18)

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From 1618 on it was not easy "TO GIVE THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES."

Not only did Rinkart have to face the horro of disease and the pain of famine, he also endured warfare. Eilenburg was conquered once by the Austrians and twice by the Swedes.

The Swedes came to Germany at the request of the Protestants. They were the so-called "PROTECTORS." But the Swedish army needed money to keep on fighting. So on



several occasions they demanded an outrageous sum of money from the desparate, starving, disease-infested community of Eilenburg!

On one occasion, when Rinkart heard about the Swedes outlandish financial demand, he went and pleaded with the Swedish commander on behalf of the city.

When the Swedish Commander refused to listen, Rinkart turned to the citizens of Eilenburg and said, "COME, MY CHILDREN, WE CAN FIND NO MERCY WITH MEN; LET US TAKE REFUGE WITH GOD." He then fell on his knees before the commander and prayed with such sincerity that the commander relented and lowered his demand.

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Someone wrote this about Martin Rinkart, "SO GREAT WERE HIS LOSSES AND CHARITIES THAT HE HAD THE UTMOST DIFFICULTY IN FINDING BREAD AND CLOTHES FOR HIS CHILDREN, AND WAS FORCED TO MORTGAGE HIS FUTURE INCOME FOR SEVERAL YEARS. YET HOW LITTLE HIS SPIRIT WAS BROKEN BY ALL THESE CALAMITIES." (Catherine Winkworth, translator)

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"GIVE THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCE, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

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Martin Rinkart died on December 10, 1649 -- only one year after the Peace of Westphalia --- the end of the 30 Years War.

His entire 31 years of ministry in Eilenburg, Germany was forged in the crucible of pain!

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Martin Rinkart had many reasons to complain.

---Instead,---he wrote a poem that goes like this:

Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices,  
Who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices,  
Who from our mother's arms has blessed us on our way  
With countless gifts of love and still is ours today.

Oh, may this bounteous God throughout our life be near us,  
With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us,  
And keep us in his grace and guide us when PERPLEXED,  
And free us --- from ALL ILLS --- in this world and the next.

This Thanksgiving -- REMEMBER MARTIN RINKART!

REMEMBER to "give thanks in ALL circumstances, for this is God's will FOR YOU in Christ Jesus!"

“Stairway to Heaven”

Genesis 28:10-17

Lent 2B 3-19-00

Rev. Thomas H. Trapp, Madison, Wisconsin

Peace to you from Him who guides the future as He has the past.

Text: “Jacob had a dream on which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD...”

Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, your promises are many. We trust that you will not only watch over us and never leave us but also, in mercy, offer us the Stairway that leads to eternal life.

Introduction:

It's the most requested song in rock 'n roll radio history. Someone has said, “It is one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most memorable musical statements.” According to *Guitar World* magazine (Sept '98), of the 100 greatest solos of all time, it is #1.

What am I talking about? The song “Stairway To Heaven” on Led Zeppelin's #IV album. I'll play it for 1 ½ minutes... See if you recognize it. [Play 1:30 seconds up to “And she's buying a stairway to heaven.”]

Of course the phrase “Stairway To Heaven” is nothing new. It goes back almost 4,000 years to the time of the Old Testament patriarch Jacob (1900 B.C.).

But the song, which was written by British rock singer Robert Plant in the spring of 1971, contains nothing about Jacob; nothing about angels; nothing about the LORD God. Yet, there seems to be an interesting connection between the song and Holy Scripture. It's a contrast between Western Culture and Christianity.

The first line of “Stairway To Heaven” is this: “There's a lady who's sure, all that glitters is gold and she's buying a stairway to Heaven...”

Now there's much controversy over the interpretation of this song. Some say it's a reference to J. R. Tolkein's “Lord of the Rings”, others claim its parallel to the story of the “Pied Piper of Hamelin”, still others claim it has cryptic Satanic backmasking messages (if you can think in reverse). I prefer *Guitar World* magazine's (Sept '98 p.58) very brief interpretation of “Stairway To Heaven”. They simply say the song is about “Man's quest for salvation.”

The question is “salvation from what?” Salvation from the problems of life: emptiness and loneliness and hopelessness. Fear, anxiety and guilt. So where do we find salvation from these things? The song “Stairway To Heaven” does not give any solid answers.

But God's Word does. That is why we are looking at Genesis 28 this morning. At first, the Old Testament Patriarch Jacob also did not have any answers to the problems of life. He had just lied to his father, connived with his mother, and stole the birthright from his brother.

He was now running for his life so his brother Esau would not kill him! Like the song, Jacob was also seeking some kind of salvation from emptiness, loneliness and hopelessness. Because of his disobedience he was filled with fear, guilt and anxiety. He was uncertain about the future; afraid of the present and guilty about the past.

He was also tired! He was on the road for several days. His goal was to reach his Uncle Laban's home in Haran some 500 miles from his hometown of Beersheba in southern Canaan. Jacob was now about 70 miles from home and tired to the bone. With sunset coming on he found a stone in the hill country of Canaan and used it as a pillow. Soon he fell asleep under the stars and the next thing he encountered was a fabulous dream. The Bible says Jacob experienced three moments of awe during the dream. The Hebrew word used for Jacob's experience can be translated: "Behold! Behold! Behold!"

First he saw a stairway to Heaven that stretched from the earth to the place where God dwells. Second he saw angels of God ascending and descending on the stairway taking prayers to God and returning with answers to man. Finally he saw the LORD God at the top of the stairway!

What did God say to the frightened, anxious, guilty Jacob? Please listen: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the West and to the East, and to the North and to the South. All peoples on Earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (V.13-15).

God promised frightened, anxious, guilty Jacob the same thing he promised his forefathers Abraham and Isaac: a great nation; the land of Canaan; and a descendant/a seed (Gen 3:15)/a Messiah through whom all peoples on Earth would be blessed.

Then, for good measure, God promised Jacob that he would watch over him; bring him back and never leave him.

Can you imagine being Jacob? You just lied to your father; connived with your mother and stole the birthright from your brother!

You are frightened, anxious and guilty and suddenly God appears to you and gives you promises galore! No wonder when Jacob woke up he said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the House of God; this is the Gate of Heaven." (v.17)

Jacob now found answers to his quest for salvation – he found security, peace, and forgiveness – in the words and promises of God.

Where do people in our culture run for answers to life's problems? Where do they try to find security, peace and forgiveness? Where do they find salvation?

In Led Zeppelin's "Stairway To Heaven" some people try to buy it! "There's a lady who's sure, all that glitters is gold and she's buying a stairway to Heaven. When she gets there she knows, if the stores are all closed with a word she can get what she came

for... and she's buying a stairway to Heaven." Some think they can buy their way into security and peace and forgiveness: "If only I had enough money..."

Some think we can find salvation: security, peace and forgiveness through reason. Please listen again to "Stairway To Heaven": "And it's whispered that soon, if we all call the tune then the piper will lead us to reason, and a new day will dawn for those who stand long and the forests will echo with laughter." People say, "If only we can educate them, then our troubles will go away!"

But the song "Stairway To Heaven" does not come to the conclusion that salvation is found in wealth/reason. In fact, the song states: "Sometimes all of our thoughts are misgiven."

The song even underscores the fact that answers to our problems in life are blowing in the wind: "The piper's calling you to join him, dear lady, can you hear the wind blow, and did you know your stairway lies on the whispering wind."

The song concludes, along with many Americans, that we are to believe in ourselves, we are to "Be a rock and not to roll." "And if you listen very hard – the tune will come to you at last. When all are one and one is all to be a rock and not to roll... And she's buying a stairway to heaven."

Whatever interpretation you have on the song "Stairway to Heaven," it is clear that there is no mention of God or His Word or His Sacraments as answers to the quest for salvation. Like Led Zeppelin's song, our American culture has left God and his Word.

But you and I know better. By the grace of God we know the stairway to heaven, we know the answer to anxiety, fear and guilt. It is found in the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of – Jacob. The God who promised that through their seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed. And that Seed was none other than the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ! He conquered sin, death and the devil and opens his nail scared-hands to us this morning and says, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Come, eat my body and drink my blood – for the forgiveness of sins. You are my dear child. I will never leave you or forsake you. I will watch over you."

It is very significant that in John 1:51, Jesus identifies someone with Jacob's dream and the stairway to heaven. In talking to his new disciple Nathanael, Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending – on – the Son of Man."

Did you notice on whom the angels of God were ascending and descending? Did you notice who is the stairway in John 1? – "The Son of Man." Jesus! "The Way, Truth, Life" the Living Word and Sacraments! Are you looking for the answer to anxiety, fear and guilt? Are you looking for salvation from emptiness, loneliness and hopelessness? Are you looking for security, peace and forgiveness? Are you looking for the answer to our quest for salvation? Just look to Jesus. For he IS – the Stairway to Heaven!