

EXEGETICAL BRIEF:
Micah 2:6—
“Do Not Preach,” They Preach

John F. Brug

What thoughts pop into your mind when you hear the word “preach”? If you were responding to a word association test, when you heard the prompt “preach . . . ,” would your automatic response be “. . . the gospel”? What are the most important memories you cherish from your ministry? Are they memories of preaching? For me, they are the different Lenten series I was privileged to preach to my congregation and the congregation’s joyful response to the forgiveness that flows from the cross. Perhaps when you hear the word “preach,” you think also of some of the challenges of preaching—the challenge of presenting the same truths in a fresh way, week after week, year after year, right on schedule, or the challenge of dealing with the reality that faithful preaching produces not only praise and thankfulness but also complaints and rejection. Hopefully, for all of us preachers, the word “preach” will always remain filled with good connotations that far outweigh the bad.

But for many in our society, and to some degree in the church at large, the very word “preach” has a negative connotation. A dictionary I consulted defines “preach” in this way:

- 1) to deliver a sermon (“preach the gospel”); 2) to give religious or moral instruction, especially in a tedious manner; 3) to advocate, especially to urge acceptance or compliance (“he preached tolerance and peaceful coexistence”).

Some definitions betray something of the speaker’s feelings about preaching. Preaching is “to give serious advice on morals or religion, to discourse in the manner of a preacher, to utter in a sermon or a formal religious harangue, to advise or recommend earnestly, to inform, to teach, or to instruct by preaching.” Synonyms of “preach” include exhort, moralize, teach, lecture, and harangue. Synonyms of “preachy” are sanctimonious, holier-than-thou, and monitory. A “sermon” is “a religious discourse delivered as part of a church service, often lengthy and tedious, a speech of reproof or exhortation.” To inform, urge, advise, moralize, lecture, reprove, and harangue—this covers quite a range of aims and styles. These definitions reflect some our society’s conflicted feelings about preaching.

Those conflicted feelings were expressed in the title/refrain of a song/sermon delivered by the pop singer Madonna a couple of decades ago, when she was still a “Material Girl.” “Papa Don’t Preach,” she preached, expressing a sentiment that resonated with the public. The irony of the song is that it displays the tendency of people who don’t want to listen to preaching to be very “preachy” about this opinion.¹ Though she probably thought she was being very modern, Madonna was simply echoing the stereotypical reaction of Israel to the preaching of the prophets and of Jesus. Hence the title of our article derived from Micah 2:6: “Do not preach,” they preach.

אַל-תִּטְּפוּ יְטִיפוּן לְאִי־יִטְּפוּ לְאֵלֶּהָ

Literally: “Do not drip,” they drip.
 “Do not drip concerning these things.”

NIV: “Do not prophesy,” their prophets say.
 “Do not prophesy about these things.”

The verb נִטַּף is not the regular verb for prophesying (נָבֵא). The verb נִטַּף means “drip” and can be used in literal contexts of the dripping of rain or dew or ointment. Such uses are most often the qal. The verb also occurs nine times in the hiphil, “cause to drip,” and in eight of these it refers to the preaching of a prophet. Five of these occur in our section of Micah 2.

“Do not *prophesy*,” they say.
 “Do not *prophesy* about these things;
 disgrace will not overtake us.” . . .
¹¹If a liar and deceiver comes and says,
 “I will *prophesy* for you plenty of wine and beer,”
 he would be just the *prophet* for this people!

The second preaching against preaching occurs in the threat of the false prophet Amaziah of Bethel against Amos:

Do not prophesy (תִּנְבֵּא) against Israel,
 and stop preaching (תִּטְּפוּ) against the house of Isaac (Am 7:16).

The third instance of נִטַּף as a reference to prophesy is found in directions from the Lord to his prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel is to deliver a message the crowd will not welcome.

⁴⁶“Son of man, set your face toward the south; *preach* against the south and prophesy against the forest of the southland. ⁴⁷Say to the southern forest: ‘Hear the word of the Lord. This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am about to set fire to you, and it will con-

¹A further irony is that the song itself can be seen as promoting a correct moral view, and the video is rather modest by Madonna standards. The plot of the song is that an unmarried, pregnant young woman is refusing to get an abortion or give up her baby. The deeper premise, however, is the implied hypocrisy of her father who would preach against her loose sexual morality but would look to abortion as a way out of her dilemma.

sume all your trees, both green and dry. The blazing flame will not be quenched, and every face from south to north will be scorched by it. ⁴⁸Everyone will see that I the Lord have kindled it; it will not be quenched.” ⁴⁹Then I said, “Ah, Sovereign Lord! They are saying of me, ‘Isn’t he just telling parables?’” ¹The word of the Lord came to me: ²“Son of man, set your face against Jerusalem and *preach* against the sanctuary. Prophecy against the land of Israel (Ezk 20:46–21:2).²

All three passages deal with preaching that is rejected by the intended audience because they find this preaching dreary and offensive. In the first two cases the audience demands the kind of ear-tickling preaching they want. In the third, the Lord tells the prophet to give them the kind of preaching they do not want, but need.³ In all of these contexts “the dripping words” of the prophet are perceived negatively by the audience. The audience finds preaching to be as annoying as a steady dripping of water.⁴

On the other hand, “dripping words” can refer to encouraging words that are refreshing like dew. “Dripping” can refer to a prophetic message that has a positive impact on the hearers (Dt 32:2, Ps 72:6, Ezk 34:26). Job and Moses refreshed hearers with dripping words.

After I had spoken, they spoke no more;
my words fell gently on their ears.
They waited for me as for showers
and drank in my words as the spring rain (Job 29:22-23).

Listen, O heavens, and I will speak;
hear, O earth, the words of my mouth.
Let my teaching fall like rain
and my words descend like dew,
like showers on new grass,
like abundant rain on tender plants.
I will proclaim the name of the Lord.
Oh, praise the greatness of our God! (Dt 32:1-3)

“Dripping words,” therefore, can have either a positive or negative connotation. It is clear that for both Amaziah and the critics of Micah the term “dripping words” is given an insulting, sarcastic twist. This derogatory tone is made even more clear by Amaziah’s charge that Amos is a hireling and a foreigner who should go back to Judah where he belongs. The Lord delivers a hard-hitting judgment against the critics of Micah because of their scorn for true preaching and their desire to hear only pleasant things.

²Hebrew and English verse numbers do not match here.

³See also the similar command in the prophet’s call in Ezekiel 2 and 3.

⁴“Dripping words” are used as a picture of tiresome speech also in everyday life, as in the nagging words of a quarrelsome wife (Prv 19:13; 27:15).

“As for the prophets who lead my people astray,
 if one feeds them, they proclaim ‘peace’;
 if he does not, they prepare to wage war against him.
 Therefore night will come over you, without visions,
 and darkness, without divination.
 The sun will set for the prophets,
 and the day will go dark for them.
 The seers will be ashamed and the diviners disgraced.
 They will all cover their faces
 because there is no answer from God” (Mi 3:5-7).

It is striking how pervasive this theme of antipathy against preaching is in the prophets.⁵ At his call (Is 6) Isaiah was warned that his preaching would harden many. He soon experienced the scorn that follows faithful preaching:

“Who is it he is trying to teach?
 To whom is he explaining his message?
 To children weaned from their milk,
 to those just taken from the breast?
 For it is: Do and do, do and do,
 rule on rule, rule on rule;⁶
 a little here, a little there.”
 Very well then, with foreign lips and strange tongues⁷
 God will speak to this people, to whom he said,
 “This is the resting place, let the weary rest”;
 and, “This is the place of repose”—but they would not listen.
 So then, the word of the Lord to them will become:
 Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule;
 a little here, a little there—(Is 28: 9-13).

To those who despise the preaching of law and gospel as mere ABC’s, too childish for their sophisticated spirituality, to those who can no longer see the law as a mirror and as a guide, to them the Bible becomes nothing but a preachy rule book. The veil descends over their eyes, and the beauty of the gospel is hidden. The only preaching they then will tolerate is that which soothes their consciences and ratifies their desires.

They say to the seers, “See no more visions!”
 and to the prophets, “Give us no more visions of what is right!
 Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions.
 Leave this way, get off this path,
 and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!”

⁵The scorn and opposition against Jeremiah is even harsher than that against the prophets whom we are considering here.

⁶Hebrew: *sav lasav sav lasav* | *kav lakav kav lakav*—they mock the prophet’s words by chanting meaningless sounds, baby talk; or, possibly, letters of the alphabet (שׁוּן).

⁷This was experienced in exile, on Pentecost, and through the speaking in tongues.

Therefore, this is what the Holy One of Israel says:

“Because you have rejected this message, relied on oppression and depended on deceit, this sin will become for you like a high wall, cracked and bulging, that collapses suddenly, in an instant.

It will break in pieces like pottery, shattered so mercilessly that among its pieces not a fragment will be found for taking coals from a hearth or scooping water out of a cistern.”

This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says:

“In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength” (Isaiah 30:10-15).

When “tell us pleasant things,” “prophesy illusions,” and “stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel” set the agenda for preaching, the famine of the Word is not far away (Am 8:11-12).

But some may say, “Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos preached in a different environment than we. They were preaching to the hardened Jews.” True, but they were preaching to God’s chosen people, a people who had been showered with blessings, a people who were God’s own people in a much deeper sense than America ever was. In the week that I am writing this, the cover of *Newsweek* proclaims “The Decline and Fall of Christian America” (the April 13, 2009 issue), and the laws of two more states have sanctioned gay marriage. Sin-adverse preachers like Robert Schuller and Joel Osteen find large, eager audiences of supporters, and observers of our culture ask, “What Ever Happened To Sin?”⁸ The world-wide Lutheran church, which on paper is “sixty-million-strong,” is a bombed-out shell of the church of the Reformation, as both law and gospel are being cut away. Are the homes of our members untouched by the pornification of America, by easy-going divorce, by living together without marriage? Is there a danger that preachers are no longer willing “to confront people with the Holy One of Israel”? Is this a threat to us, when we see so many willing to travel the easier road of “pleasant things”? It would be difficult to answer any of these questions in the negative.

In a culture where happiness is replacing holiness as the goal of preaching, and human aspirations are crowding God’s will out of the center of preaching, where will the preacher find the courage to keep confronting people, in society and in the church, with the Holy One of Israel? Only where Micah and Isaiah found it.

But as for me, I am filled with power,
with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might,
to declare to Jacob his transgression, to Israel his sin (Mi 3:8).

⁸The 1970s title of psychiatrist Karl Menninger’s book has been echoed by Michael Horton and other recent writers.

This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says:
 "In repentance and rest is your salvation,
 in quietness and trust is your strength" (Is 30:15).

Prophets then and now really have no choice about their message. They are simply for-tellers and forth-tellers, whose only job is to proclaim the decrees of the king, not to find the best spin for the message. The faithful prophet has no choice.

The lion has roared—who will not fear?
 The Sovereign Lord has spoken—who can but prophesy? (Am 3:8)

But if I say, "I will not mention him
 or speak any more in his name,"
 his word is in my heart like a fire,
 a fire shut up in my bones.
 I am weary of holding it in,
 Indeed I cannot. (Je 20:9)

But we can easily make a critical mistake when we reflect on society's scorn for preaching—the mistake of thinking that scorn for preaching flows primarily from resentment of God's law, the mistake of thinking we can appease the world by preaching less law and more gospel. To be sure, the world resents God's law whenever it impinges on their freedom, but its most intense hatred is for the gospel. Satan does not hate the law so much (how can he, it's one of his most effective tools?). His most intense hatred is for the gospel. Jesus and Paul were not hated by their audiences so much for their preaching of law, but for their preaching of the gospel (1 Co 1,2). Our society has set out down the same road. No message is more offensive to it than the claim "Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through him." "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" is a hated message in our "spiritual not religious" world. Soft-pedaling the law may win us a little breathing space in the world, but it will never take away the greater offense of the gospel. But "we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me (1 Co 9:16:17).

A pastor is many things: counselor, comforter, absolver, encourager, persuader, friend, but he can never stop being a preacher, a preacher of the whole counsel of God, the smallest law and the biggest gospel. He should not be ashamed of the name "preacher." It is a title of honor, a greater honor than he deserves, a gift of grace.

When the preacher understands how the law and gospel are inseparably joined both in the world's hatred and in God's plan, he will avoid

both extremes—soft-pedaling the law to the impenitent and being stingy with gospel comfort to those who tremble at sin. His end goal is always to build up with the gospel where the law has torn down.

And though saddened by the world's scorn for faithful preaching, he won't be so focused on it that he loses his joy in the support and encouragement of the faithful remnant that cherish preaching. Like Elijah and Jeremiah and Paul he will be encouraged by the support of those who gladly hear the Word and keep it.

What is important is what is on the preacher's lips and in his heart. Substance is more important than symbols, but the importance of symbols of preaching should not be underestimated. Well-chosen symbols reflect and build inner attitudes. If symbols like vestments and pulpits say to people that the preacher believes he is set apart from the crowd, then they are functioning as very effective symbols and conveying their intended meaning.⁹ The preacher *is* set apart, not by worth, not by merit, not even primarily by knowledge or piety, but by call and office—his call and office are not to speak his own message nor to follow his own agenda, but to be a for-teller and forth-teller of the whole counsel of God.

Symbols are intended to express and reinforce values. Though some laughed at his action as pretentious, there was a reason President-elect Obama felt a need to stand behind a podium with a seal of the Office of President-Elect. There is a reason that presidents often speak from the Oval Office. Historically, symbols have always functioned as signs of office. If a preacher is embarrassed by symbols because he is embarrassed by the concept of office, he needs to examine his understanding of his role.

Such symbols, of course, may vary with culture,¹⁰ and symbols have value only if they are explained and understood, and if people believe that the values expressed by the symbols are biblical truths, not human pretensions.

Symbols, well chosen and sincerely believed, also function as promises—promises to be a preacher not a chat-er, a proclaimer not a negotiator. Symbols are valuable, but remain variable and optional. The substance of preaching must remain unchanged for it is set by God.

⁹The pulpit, of course, was not just a symbol but a practical object. To get close to a large crowd a preacher has to be either above it (pulpit) or below it (tiered auditorium). He can't simply be in the middle of it. It was not an accident that when addressing large crowds Jesus preached from hillsides or from boats. Mega-church preachers who give up the pulpit seldom give up the stage.

¹⁰Speaking for God can also be symbolized, for example, by holding an open Bible and reading from it often, or by sitting in a special chair, or by some other sign, or by no sign but by the power of the Word alone.

The preacher will want the substance to his preaching to be such that when his course is finished he can say:

I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole counsel of God (Ac 20:27).

The preacher must understand that there is a good sense in which his preaching must be like a steady dripping. It must be persistent, as persistent as the steady dripping of the water that wears away the rock, persistent words of an unchanging message, which the Spirit uses to turn hearts of stone to living hearts of flesh. The charge to the preacher remains unchanged:

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry (2 Tim 4:2-5).

Postscript for Thought and Discussion **—Two Preachers**

Below are quotations attributed to two well-known preachers in which they express attitudes toward their preaching. Who would you guess said them?

When I am angry, I can pray well and preach well.

I made a decision when my father passed away that I was going to be who God made me to be and not try to preach like my father.

The first is attributed to Martin Luther, the second to Joel Osteen.

What do the statements say about the approach to preaching of each?

Evaluate and qualify each statement.