

Preaching Emmanuel: A Sacramental Reason to Preach

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In our increasingly pluralistic American landscape, many preachers wonder about the nature and effectiveness of preaching. For instance, a growing chorus of voices within the Alternative Worship movement, a particular movement within the Emerging Church, now proposes the abandonment of preaching and instead seeks more participatory activities within worship. Even those unfamiliar with this development may wonder about the purpose and value of preaching as we see church attendance decline and cultural respectability for Christianity dwindle. Still others may feel burdened by the weight of exegesis and cultural competency amid the demands of twenty-first century congregational life.

From our postmodern setting, for many reasons, pastors may ask, “Why preach?” From within the Lutheran tradition, a particular strand of thought arises that argues for Christ’s sacramental presence within the sermon. Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer offer words of encouragement and conviction for preachers across the ages, namely that the fullness of God’s Word becomes incarnate within our incredibly human words. If we believe these things to be true, one reason to continue preaching within postmodernity is that Christ becomes uniquely present within Christian sermons. To deny that sort of divine engagement unnecessarily inhibits personal and communal relationships with God.

Martin Luther: Christ really present in proclamation

Many remember Martin Luther for his proposed liturgical and theological reforms, especially in relation to sacraments. Luther espoused that God became fully present—not only spiritually, but in body and blood—even as the elements of bread and wine remain. Yet, Luther declared with perhaps even greater emphasis that God also appeared fully and personally within the sermon. Luther considered the act of preaching salvation through Christ such a high honor that he once quipped that pastors might leave the celebration of sacraments to others as they were “lower offices” than that of preaching.¹ In another place he even more clearly asserts, “‘Here God speaks.’ God Himself has said it *et iterum* (again).”²

Notice that herein we can see a deep similarity between Luther’s Eucharistic and homiletical theologies. In both the sermon and the sacraments, God becomes present as the primary actor in the event. Just as Jesus is the sacrifice and priest, so the Word

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speaks through the preacher’s words. In his emphasis of *et iterum*, “again” in Latin, Luther suggests that God consistently and presently speaks the same word of grace for the people of God spoken in creation, incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. For Luther, then, so long as the sermon proclaimed the Gospel, the sermon becomes a sacramental avenue for the presence of God. From his perspective, this applies not only to Luther’s preaching and other sermons in the Lutheran tradition, but indeed to all sermons across Christian history that faithfully preached Christ.

Lutheran theologians like Fred Meuser and Frank Senn attempt to further distill this theology in various ways. In his book *Luther the Preacher*, Meuser articulates Luther’s doctrine of preaching in this way: “The word brings God with all God’s gifts” precisely because the church encounters “the real presence of Christ in proclamation.”³ In this Meuser emphasizes the sacramental role that preaching plays for Luther in the life of the church. Rather than a rational argument or a behavioral exhortation, the sermon becomes a place of immediate encounter with the Triune God. Herein lies the deep importance for Gospel proclamation in Lutheran preaching. Since God inhabits the preacher’s words, we must faithfully depict how this God promises to interact with humanity, namely justification by grace through faith. A Lutheran homiletic approach proclaims the Gospel because it is the good gift of forgiveness and justification that comes with the God we meet in the sermon.

Senn points to the particularly innovative nature of Luther’s claim: “Luther was articulating a new understanding of the word. The word is as much a means of grace as the sacraments, but grace no longer understood in terms of substance but in terms of communication and response ... As God’s self communication, the word of God is an encounter with the Person of God.”⁴ Of

1. LW 39:314.

2. WA 51:517. Quoted in Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1983), 59.

3. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, 13, 59.

4. Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 306.

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course, throughout church history, many theologians believed that God became present through various sorts of special and natural revelation; yet, in Senn's estimation, Luther was the first to fully explore God's promise to inhabit the preached word in order to communicate with God's people.

As an act of personal communication, the grace found within the sermon comes directly from the God who incarnates within the preacher's words, and what is more, expects a response from the congregation. This conversational element lifts up the relational character of the sermon. Just as people enter into or continue to foster a relationship through conversation, so too the Creator chooses to continually engage creation through the act of preaching. From a Lutheran perspective, then, the vitality of preaching comes from the incredible relational encounter with God's very self within the sermon.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Sermon as sacrament Christ's real presence

Nearly 400 years after Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer continued to emphasize God's presence within preaching. In his homiletical lectures to the seminarians at Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer masterfully combines clarity and poetry as he describes this miraculous event. In his words, "the proclaimed word is not a medium of expression for something else, something which lies behind it, but rather it is the Christ himself walking through the congregation as the Word."⁵ Such a claim squashed any potential ambiguity within Bonhoeffer's perspective on preaching. The sermon for Bonhoeffer is nothing other than a liturgically repeated self-revelation of Christ, personally and immediately, within the communion of the church. Notice that the preacher's words, then, are much more than a vehicle for God's presence. Just as Christ became fully human and forever inseparable from human nature, the sermonic proclamation is Christ. The sermon is not an ancillary husk to the essential kernel of Christ either hidden beneath the words or obscured by the sands of time. For Bonhoeffer, presence of the Word made flesh remains inextricably tied up with the sermon's words.

Bonhoeffer himself recognized the similarity between such a claim and the divine presence within baptism and Eucharist. Indeed, in light of this, he believed that "there is a sacrament of the word."⁶ Now, the language of sacraments recalls all sorts of

theological divisions, but from the Lutheran perspective, this suggests a vital relationship. Much of Lutheran theology considers God fully present in baptism and Eucharist, even as the elements remain fully themselves. Bread remains bread, wine remains wine, water remains water, but in the midst of the church, in the sacramental use of these elements, God is fully present. To say there is a sacrament of the word is to indicate that our words remain our words. But in the act of preaching for the church, God mysteriously and miraculously becomes present, and God's presence takes precedence. The ultimate import of the sacrament lies not in the material alone, whether physical or verbal, but in the incarnate presence of the divine tied to the material. Simply put, a sacrament of the word for Bonhoeffer means that Christ becomes present in the act of preaching.

Speaking Christ in tumultuous times

Recall that both Luther and Bonhoeffer wrote in tumultuous times, not only in their own lives, but also on the world stage. The Reformation turned sixteenth century Europe on its theological head even as monarchs set out to colonize the newly discovered American continents, yet at the core of Luther's theology lay an emphasis upon preaching. Bonhoeffer faced the rise of Nazism, the genocide of the Jews, and the bastardization of the church at the hands of the state. In the midst of this socio-theological hurricane, Bonhoeffer reminded young pastors of the vitality of preaching. For each theologian in their respective context, preaching deserves attention because in preaching God becomes active in ways that meet the needs of a drastically changing world. In the face of inconceivable change and unthinkable evil, we need God and so we need the sermon.

As this sacramental presence of Christ becomes clear, two other functions of preaching also appear. First, preaching may be considered a type of scriptural act, but not simply because preachers begin with a biblical text. In the words of Michael Root, "the sermon then not only speaks about Christ, it *speaks Christ*. The sermon is then truly word of God."⁷ From this perspective, to say that a sermon is scriptural is to indicate that it may function as Scripture in the life of the congregation. A preacher's words become Word of God, and thus a preacher's words speak Scripture. Surely the canon must stand as the plumb line to measure all sermons. However, in our rapidly changing world sermons provide an opportunity to view the incarnation not only as a historical event but as a consistent way that God continues to inhabit and transform today's world. Sermons embody the dynamic nature of Scripture, for in the words of a sermon the Word works into ever-new situations, speaking in unfathomed ways from the same fountain of truth.

In a related manner, preaching presents a dialogical reality with God and within the church universal. At the crux of our postmodern location, the complementary voices of God and the preacher suggest an intimate conversation, not only in that mo-

5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Bonhoeffer: Worldly Preaching*, Clyde E. Fant, trans. (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1975), 126.

6. Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching*, 130.

7. Michael Root, "Preaching Justification," in *Proclaiming the Gospel: Preaching for the Life of the Church*, Brian K. Peterson, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 31.

ment, but also with all previous sermons and preachers. God's sacramental interaction in preaching means that the words of a sermon are not only human words to a congregation but a human prayer to God and divine dictation to a congregation, all of which take part in the larger conversation with God that began in creation. This conversational form is a fluid one with dynamic potential to invite other voices to participate in the wonderfully sacramental sermon. To paraphrase Geoffrey Wainwright, sermons are "words from God, words to God, and words about God" and, as such, all people may participate in that conversation. In this juxtaposition, faith may find more clarity, both in terms of our beliefs as well as the application of that faith to our lifestyle. The conversational components of Scripture, the church across time and space, and God suggests that sacramental preaching enables us to speak truth and life.

Relationally speaking, part of the sermon is entirely external. Luther, Bonhoeffer, and others within the Lutheran tradition focus upon God's inbreaking into the world through the preached word. The Creator inhabits the created realm to bring life out of death, to bring newness out of our ashes. To claim that God becomes incarnate within the sermon is to trust the mystery of God's activity rather than assume a human ability to conjure Christ. Such presence remains at the divine prerogative to unite us with Christ in baptism, where we find a death and resurrection like Christ's. Within our sermons, rather than sanctifying our old lives, God intends to put them to death, that we might find life with Christ. Such conversation thus anticipates transformation. This Lutheran tradition of preaching lifts up the interactional dynamics of preaching because, as we interact with Christ, we are inevitably transformed into Christ's image and likeness.

Preaching Emmanuel

Lutheran theology provides this unique homiletical paradigm that encourages pastors to continue to proclaim the gospel in the tumultuous transitionary time that is postmodernity. One helpful way to recast this sacrament of the word for our postmodern context is in the language and imagery of Emmanuel. Christmas rings in our ears at this name and rightly so. Yet we cannot allow the babe in a manger to limit the power of Emmanuel. The name Emmanuel suggests God fully with us, the Creator purposefully present within creation. The baby of Bethlehem becomes the human from Nazareth who accepts crucifixion for the world's justification, who rises from death to provide salvation, and who sends the Holy Spirit for ongoing sanctification. Emmanuel, the God with us, is the God who will not forsake us, no matter the obstacle and no matter the cost. Emmanuel is the fullness of God with us, not only living with us, but working on our behalf to give us life to the fullest.

From this Lutheran homiletic we receive equal parts encouragement and conviction that preaching matters. We find encouragement because there is a sacrament of the word where God speaks the same loving word spoken in creation and on the cross. From the midst of the Reformation, Luther warns us that to stop

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preaching is to prevent the fullness of Christ's presence in Christ's church. Bonhoeffer declares that the sermon is a sacramental act. The impossible possibility, the inconceivable reality, is that in the sermon God becomes fully present with God's people, seeking to restore within these very people the *imago dei*. At the same time we discover renewed conviction because preaching now entails a responsibility to preach this God faithfully. Jesus becomes present regardless of our fallacies and heresies. That is God's prerogative in Christ. This means that preaching that avoids or confuses the Gospel may cloud or misdirect our listeners from the God who walks among them as the Word in our words. We are summoned to remain ever vigilant that our words do not obscure the Word.

Like Luther and Bonhoeffer, we face an unknown future. The world is changing rapidly around us. As our churches decline in attendance and influence, we fear that preaching no longer provides a purpose for postmodern people. In this context, some Christians now avoid the act of preaching altogether. However, Luther and Bonhoeffer witness to the vitality, indeed the necessity, of preaching. We need this divine presence that we might meet God in Christ, and that God might shape us into little Christs so that we might live faithfully whatever future may come. To become like Christ, we must meet Christ; in the sermon God meets us enfleshed in our language and intending our transformation. Why preach? Because in preaching we find Jesus, our Emmanuel, God with us! In Jesus we find new ways to speak life into the world, all of which remains consistent with God's self-revelation to creation. A sacramental presence of God, with scriptural and conversational implications, means that the sermon provides an invaluable *event* for interaction between God in Christ and humanity. As creatures made in the *imago dei*, we cannot underestimate this Christ event. In the sermon we engage in a conversation that began with the Word at creation. In the sermon we discover ways to actively speak the Word of God as the Spirit breathes new life. In the sermon we come face to face with Jesus.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think preaching has lost its attractiveness to many people in our tumultuous times?
2. What does it mean to you, with Luther, that Christ is really present in proclamation? What does it mean to you, with Bonhoeffer, that preaching is a sacrament of the Word?
3. What does it mean to hear that Christ is Emmanuel, God with you? How does this message transform your life?