

# Some Thoughts on Christian Preaching

Co-missioners,

Our conference in January featured a session on preaching. Jerry Burce prepared some notes to get it started. A week or so later, these notes somehow reached an ELCA bishop who doesn't know Crossings. He promptly asked Jerry for permission to share it with his deans.

Today we make these notes available for anyone who might find them useful.

Peace and Joy,  
The Crossings Community

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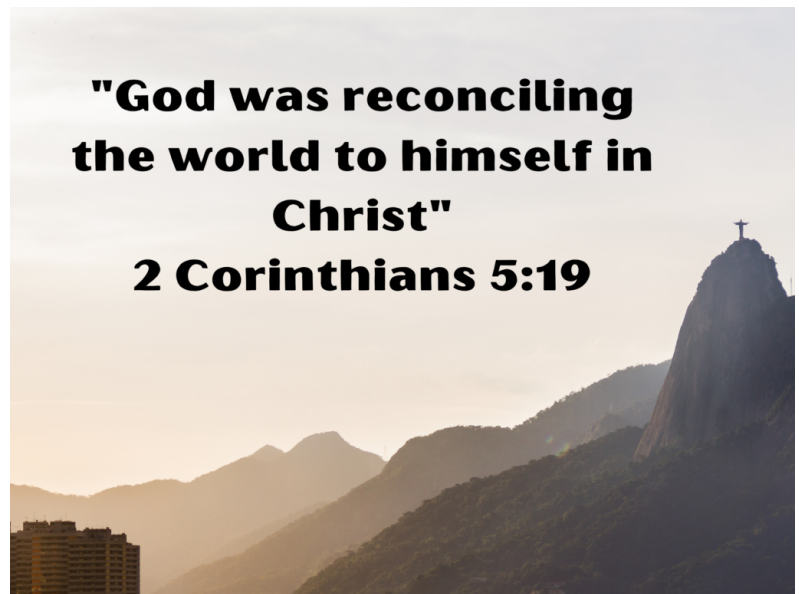
## Some Thoughts on Christian Preaching by Jerome Burce

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### A starting point

1. Time was, we're told, when the word of the Lord was rare (1 Sam. 3:1). Later the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14) and promised to remain among us (Matt. 18:20, 28:20). The purpose and goal of Christian preaching is to honor, serve, and keep this promise.
2. These days our God is a talkative God. Whenever a preacher steps into a pulpit she is looking at a specific group of people that God wants to speak to in this specific moment.

God has *news* for them. *Good* news when all else is said.



Reconciling the world (from Canva)

3. Or to put this more sharply, God has fresh updates on yesterday's news, curated specifically for *this* set of people on *this* new day. That's why, in good practice, today's sermon is invariably preceded by one or more of yesterday's texts. It reminds the hearers that God is the one who is driving the talking—or is meant to be, at least.
4. That God is relying on *my* mind and *my* voice to craft and deliver *God's* update on *God's* news for people *God's* heart is absurdly set on: this is a thought—a reality—that should now and then drive every preacher to gape in wonder, or writhe in fear and trembling, or maybe both. *Kyrie eleison.*

### **The Christian preacher's job according to St. Paul**

5. "We proclaim Christ crucified, a scandal to some, nonsense to others, but to those with a clue, whoever they be, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor.

1:23-24).

6. Again: "We are envoys of Christ, God urging you through us: we beg you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God [or be friends with God]. For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that we might become in him the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:20-21).

### **The Christian preacher's job according to Christ who created it and whose Spirit directs it**

7. "You will be *my* witnesses...to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

### **Some things I take for granted as a Christian preacher**

8. The only genuine God we've got is the God we have in Christ Jesus. God says this Godself throughout the scriptures we're given to preach on. The only trustworthy path to the all-encompassing and life-giving graciousness of God is through Christ Jesus. So Paul's job is my job too: to proclaim Christ crucified—also risen, ascended, reigning, and coming again as Lord and judge.
9. A sermon that does the Jesus-dodge—amid all its God-talk it treats Christ as an afterthought if it mentions him at all—is not a Christian sermon. It's also a useless sermon. Shame on me if I should ever be guilty of one.
10. I preach Christ because I need Christ. So do the people I'm talking to. So does the wide world. None of us can escape the should-dos, didn't-dos, and won't-dos that we're mired in. All of us are convinced at one level or another that God Almighty (if there is one) needs to get God's act together. Christ alone is God's *preferred* solution to both these issues—his with us and ours with him. My job is to make this as plain as I can.

11. As a preacher I am a servant of the Holy Spirit who is God in the faith-replacement business. Here I have two key jobs. The first is to put out words the Spirit can use to disabuse hearers of false faith, especially the kind that is bred in their bones and is reducing them even now to dust and ashes (see 10 above). My greater job still is to put out words the Spirit can use to ignite and feed the faith God wants them to enjoy, which is faith in Christ Jesus, and through Christ, in God as the One who dotes on them and all creation with them and is busy even now with God's ongoing project of making all things new, themselves included. See 2 Cor. 5:17.
12. I peddle the impossible. This is at the heart of my work as a Christian preacher. I tout the mighty works of God who has done the impossible, who promises the impossible, and is busy this very day making real some things that cannot be and yet they are because God is doing them. "Look! Open your eyes! The old has passed away. The new *has* come."
13. I peddle the cross. That's the mightiest of God's works on which all others are anchored.
14. Whenever I stand in a pulpit I'm looking simultaneously at a clutch of incredulous sinners and a gaggle of trusting saints. That's what God is seeing as God looks at them the only way God does these days, i.e. in and through Christ Jesus. I need to report on this to them regularly. Both sides of the coin, properly reported, will almost always come as news to almost all of them. The impossible side of the coin—the saintly side, that is—is the one that almost always needs more touting than it gets.
15. A sermon has served God's purposes for it if at least somebody rides home after the service with their toes

tapping a little and their hearts a little lighter than they were when they came. They're glad they heard what they heard about God-in-Christ for them and for the world.

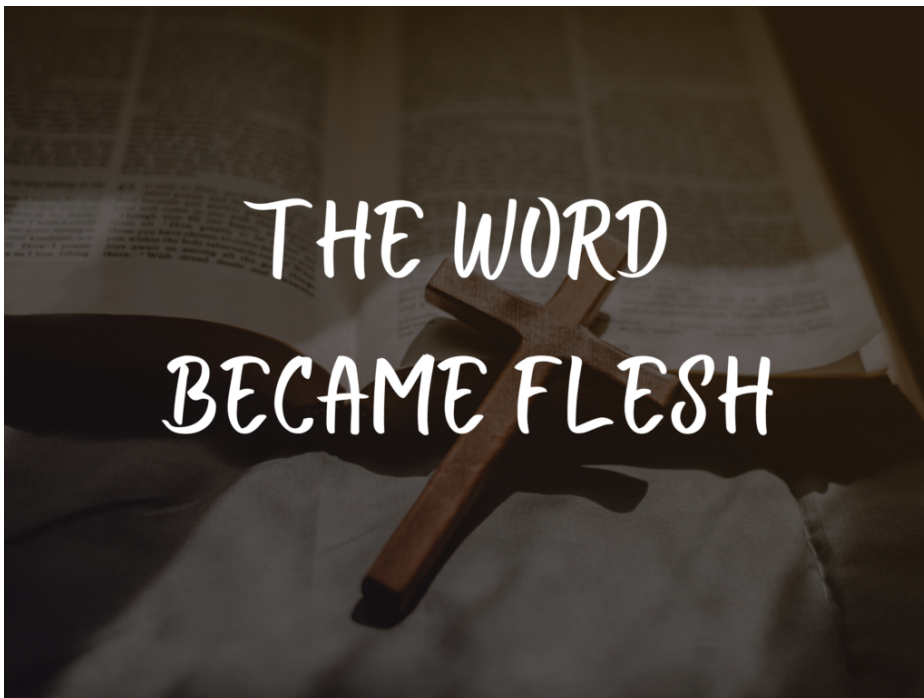
16. The chances that everyone will ride home with toes tapping is all but nil. Every group I preach to is a mix of people who are ready to listen and people who are not. Some who listen will be offended by the truth I tell (if God's truth is what I do tell). Others will be glad for it.
17. What God is up to in Christ is almost always better than I imagine or am ready to admit. So too with people I'm talking to. My key job is to keep probing and touting the marvels of the good news that Christ Crucified is Lord today.
18. The Gospel, like the Law before it, speaks not only to individuals but to groups. God's ultimate aim is not (per popular imagination) to put us each on our own heavenly cloud, each strumming their own harp and humming their own tune. God's promise, rather, is of an age to come—already breaking in—when all creation is united in praise and joy. I need to pitch that regularly. American Christians—Lutherans too—need to hear it regularly.

**Some rules of thumb I operate with as a preacher (an unsorted and incomplete mix)**

19. Aim always for joy, your own as well as theirs. You have good news to tell. Wildly good. Have a blast in the telling.
20. Talk to the people. Not at the people. Don't send a stream of words over their heads expecting them to reach up and grab for something useful that maybe, just maybe, will apply to them.

21. You're not up there to lecture. You're there to persuade, to woo, to underscore, to invite, to console, to energize. Use language appropriate for this.
22. Translate, translate, translate. Put church words into real-people's English. Instead of "believe" try "count on." Instead of "righteous" say "all right." In lieu of "sin" try any number of synonyms or exemplifiers: "selfishness," "willfulness," "arrogance," "disregard," "disbelief," "carelessness," "failure," etc. etc.
23. Remember going in that you're an addict talking to other addicts, all of us incorrigible, yet all of us treasured by God who is strangely stuck on us. Don't be mealy-mouthed about naming the addiction—exposing it, calling it out.
24. Make it genuine. Drop Christ into a reality the people you're talking to are dealing with today. If it's one the text exposes, show how they too are caught in it. Then show how *Christ* handles this reality and overcomes it for them. Don't expect them to figure this out for themselves. Don't say "Jesus died for your sins" and let it go at that. *Satis non est.*
25. Don't tell them what they're supposed to do (unless that's to underscore how they're not getting it done.) Keep telling them what God-in-Christ has done, *is* doing, has promised to do. Help them imagine the difference this makes.
26. Don't dodge the deepest fears or griefs or wrongs that the folks you're talking to are facing, or in some cases refusing to face. These are the very things God put Christ on a cross to deal with. So name them. Expose them. Do so gently.

27. Be honest with them. Confess your own complicity or participation in the sins and troubles you name. Let them see that their need for Christ is your need too.
28. Help them admit that there's a lot about God they just don't like; or that God, for God's part, has plenty of reason not to like them. After that, get busy praising the God who loves us all to death in Christ Jesus. This includes the folks that we don't love.
29. Per the late James Nestingen, watch your grammar. God owns the big verbs, as in God gives. We by contrast (merely) get. Verb tenses are hugely important and too often ignored, especially when treating of the Gospel. "All things *are* " "You *have* been raised and *are* seated with Christ in the heavenly places." Yes, they'll find this unbelievable. Keep saying it anyway.



The Word became Flesh (from Canva)

30. Keep looking for angles on the Gospel you haven't spotted

yet. Take it for granted that the news is always bigger, better—more encompassing, enlivening—than you’ve yet imagined. Keep praying for a fresh “Aha”, and for fresh ways of conveying it.

31. Adverbs and conditionals are tools of the devil: “*if* you *truly* repent, *if* you *really* ” “If you’d *just* try harder.” Don’t ever say such things.
32. Where pronouns are concerned, “You” and “I” are often preferable to “we.” The latter can get tediously generic.
33. Never ever lie about God and what you claim to know about him. Don’t ever shove Christ in a corner and leave him there. Don’t you *dare* reduce Jesus to nothing more than a model and example of what the people you’re talking should be doing themselves.
34. This said, keep inviting them to see through Christ’s eyes, to think with Christ’s mind, to love with Christ’s heart. Practice doing this yourself as you look at them.
35. Keep underscoring how Christ *is* with us, especially in the sacrament.
36. Be sure to aggravate them (and yourself) with the scandal of God-in-Christ for every sinner, and not only those whose politics we approve of or whose poverty we feel bad about. Do this with regularity as a servant of the One who loved his enemies to death and still does.
37. Take it for granted that you’re bound to misfire with at least some of the people you’re talking to. Dump that in Christ’s lap, praying for a chance to talk to them again. Do the same when the sermon is a complete bust and you stumble home feeling embarrassed for having preached it.
38. At least 100 sermons are hiding in every text you work



- with. To unearth the one you'll preach, look for something in the text that surprises *you*. It will surprise them too.
39. Repetition, repetition, repetition. Christ crucified-and-risen for people who have *got* to have him on their side. That's the job. Keep returning to the cross.
40. What comes of any sermon, even the best, is beyond your control. You tossed out the seeds. The Spirit will do with them as the Spirit will. As for you, go home. Have a beer. Enjoy your family. Let them enjoy you. Go to bed that night with the sign of the cross and some joy in the Gospel. Christ has us covered. Enough said.
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**Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use**

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