

Luther on the Sound of the Wind (John 3)

Co-missioners,

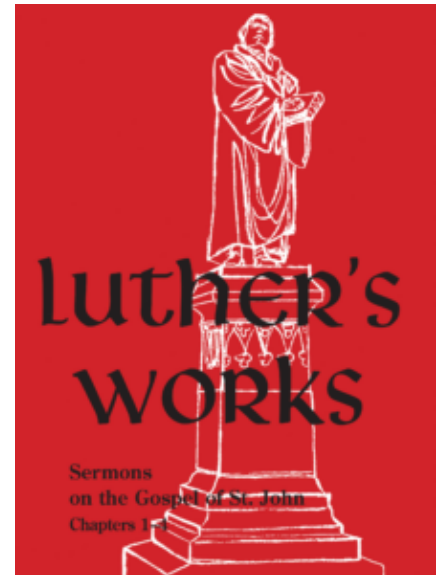
Our editor has been poking around some more in Luther's Works. We send you something he wants to share as a follow-up of sorts to last week's post.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

Luther on the Sound of the Wind (John 3)

by Jerome Burce

Earlier this week a pending pericope study sent me to the American edition of *Luther's Works* (hereafter LW) to find out what Luther might have to say about the ninth chapter of St. John. That's the gospel appointed for this coming Fourth Sunday in Lent, Series A in the Revised Common Lectionary. It tells of Jesus giving sight to the man born blind.



Luther's works:
Sermons on the Gospel
of St. John, Chapters
1-4 (Available on
Amazon)

I soon discovered that Luther doesn't address this episode, at least not in the three volumes that LW devotes to his sermons on John. I should have known this, of course. Thirty-five years ago, a retired pastor gave me his complete set of LW. It consisted at the time of fifty-five volumes. More have been published since. Not that I've added to the initial benefaction, which itself has gone scandalously underused for as long as I've owned it. May the pastor I bestow it on in ten or twenty years scuff up far more of its pages.

I don't blush too much in 'fessing up to this. I figure that among those who read these words are other parish pastors who spent too much time fiddling with bulletins and newsletters and not nearly enough with their noses in the books where such noses belong. Other readers—many more, I should think—will count themselves lucky to have had a single volume of Luther's writings on their shelves along the way, let alone a whole set.

With this in mind I start with some information so basic as to cause any self-respecting scholar to roll their eyes.

The sermons presented in the aforementioned volumes of LW amount to almost 1400 pages of limpid English translation by Martin Bertram, Robert's father. They cover only ten of John's 21 chapters, 1-4 (Vol. 22), 6-8 (Vol. 23), and 14-16 (Vol. 24). Of these, chapter 4 gets the lightest treatment, a mere four sermons. By contrast, it takes twenty-seven sermons for Luther to work his way through chapter 3. He did this in 1538, in the middle of a three-year stretch when he was covering for Wittenberg's parish pastor, [Johannes Bugenhagen](#), who was on a reforming mission to Denmark. John's Gospel seems to have been Luther's go-to text when tasked with supply preaching. A similar absence by Bugenhagen in 1530-31 had led to the forty-five sermons on chapters 6-8. During the later absence of '37-'39 he began with chapters 14-16. Only then did he turn to John's own beginning, chapters 1-4—or so say the notes by Jaroslav Pelikan, editor of the volumes in question. The word "systematic" rarely comes up in discussions of Luther. No wonder.

The word that does apply to Luther's sermons is "Thorough" (capital "T" intended). His approach is expository. He reads a verse, discusses it at length, then moves on to the next verse. At some point he stops, though what causes him to stop I haven't ascertained. (Tongue in cheek: did a bell ring? Did Katie cough?) The next sermon picks up where the last one left off. When compiled, what one gets in effect is a commentary on the chapters in question, accessible also to lay readers. That's how these were presented when they first appeared in print, with the editor of one volume going so far as to remove any indication of where one sermon ends and the next begins.

One looks in vain in these sermons for the kind of organizing principles that some of us were taught in preaching classes.

There is no obvious structure in the unfolding of Luther's thought. One spots no glimmers of Richard Caemmerer's Goal-Malady-Means approach, and still less of the six-step Diagnostic/Prognostic method that Crossings touts. Luther would have found the latter bemusing, not to say laughable, for the reason that it pushes preachers to face a reality that Luther took to be utterly obvious. We are sinners. As such, we have a problem with God, who has a problem with us. We *need* the Christ God gave to solve this problem for us. It's in the trusting of this Christ that enduring life begins. It's God's own, most gracious self who, through the Spirit, makes this trusting happen. Such is Luther's drumbeat. The implacable God-against-us whom we encounter every day—"Listen to the Law! Take it seriously!"—turns out in Christ to be wondrously for us. "Hear the Gospel! Trust what you hear!"

With that we get to what strikes me as the operative (if not the organizing) principle in all these sermons. Ed Schroeder taught some of us to call it the "double dipstick" test for genuine gospel, where "dipstick"—as in a car—is a probe for the stuff that needs to be there for the thing to work the way it's supposed to, be it an engine or a sermon. Where the latter is concerned, be sure of two things when you deliver God's Gospel: a) that Christ is getting all the glory and b) that troubled consciences are being comforted. This is precisely Luther's project as a preacher. He says as much himself in the opening paragraph of his first sermon on John 1.

"Therefore we propose to consider [St. John's] Gospel in the name of the Lord [i.e. Jesus], discuss it, and preach it as long as we are able, to the glory of Christ [Dipstick A] and to our own welfare, comfort, and salvation [Dipstick B], without worrying whether the world shows much interest in it." (LW 22:5)

And so Luther does for those almost 1400 pages I mentioned earlier. There he delivers the Gospel goods to the people he's looking at and talking to in 16th century Wittenberg. What he says is uniformly relevant to their daily experience. It is also consistently cast in the down-to-earth language they speak among themselves. It comes across from start to finish as God's message to *them*, though even better, as God's message *for* them.

Would that every Lutheran preacher in the 21st century tackled their work in the same way, with the same double-dipstick goals in mind. But here I'm begging for a miracle, certainly where the American Lutheran scene is concerned. Still, the God I'm begging to specialize in miracles, so by all means, beg with me.

+ + +

A brief example, then, of Luther's work in John.

Again, what sent me to these sermons in the first place was a question of how he handles the matter of blindness that predominates in John 9. On finding nothing on this, I fell to wondering about a question left over from two Sundays ago, when we listened to Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3. Verse 8 has always puzzled me. "The wind blows where it chooses," Jesus says. "You hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."



Tree in the wind (from Canva)

A quick note here: the object of this metaphor is not the Spirit Itself—a common misperception—but rather people *born* of the Spirit. What might Luther make of this?

Quite a bit, as it turns out. He starts his treatment of verse 8 in the latter part of one sermon with an extended reflection on the nature of wind as a reality that can't be denied—we hear it, we feel it—and yet it can't be explained. 21st century hearers might disagree on this latter point. Still, it leads usefully to the following:

“Listen, even though you do not understand this. The sound of the wind is also heard in this Word of God: ‘I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’ Furthermore, you also have the wind in the baptismal water; the Holy Spirit is blowing there. You cannot understand how a [person] can be renewed by water and the Holy Spirit, nor how one who died can live anew. But believe it, accept it, and content yourself with hearing the sound of water and with feeling the water and the sound of the Holy Spirit. It matters not that you cannot understand how you are renewed. Just say: ‘I will believe it. I do not know either whence the wind

comes; and still I know that it exists, and I can hear and feel it. Thus I will also believe God when He says that Baptism initiates a new birth, even though I cannot understand how it can renew me, keep and preserve me for eternal life. I will simply hear the Word, accept the water of Baptism, and believe. After all, I have to accept far lesser things without understanding them. The fact that I was born anew this way is just as true as the fact that I hear the wind. Just as I know that I hear and feel the wind but do not know whence it comes, so I shall also believe that I am born anew by water and the Holy Spirit and that the old [person] in me must die if I wish to enter eternal life.” (LW 22:295)

Luther sticks with this theme in the next two sermons. It’s as if the “sound of the wind” has somehow gripped him. He makes much use of it. Here are two more snippets:

“No one sees the Holy Spirit; no one touches Him. I know not whence He comes and where He goes. Thus I cannot see a Christian either. Nor can I say: ‘At this time and in this place I shall become a Christian.’ In brief, it is invisible; neither time nor place can be fixed for it; it is intangible; it can’t be felt, it can’t be clothed, it does not consist in anything than can be seen and felt—it is sheer nothing.

“But what good is it to me if it is nothing? Yes, it is nothing if you ask your five senses about it and consult with your reason and wisdom. You must put reason and senses aside and remember that what makes a Christian is something of which you hear no more than the breath and sound. You hear the voice. Follow it and believe it, and you will be born anew.” (LW 22:300)

Notice the gentle encouragement in that final sentence. And finally–

“Here the Lord explains the meaning of sound. It is the physical Word that one hears, the testimony and speeches delivered by preachers; it is the proclamation of the Word of God. In all Christendom we have nothing greater or more sublime than the Word of God. We hear the sound of the wind; Holy Scripture presents the Word to us everywhere; for instance, in Baptism, where the Word is the principal item. One hears the Word and feels the water, and without the Word Baptism is nothing. What can water accomplish without the Word of God? Likewise, in Holy Communion bread and wine are of no effect. But when the Word is attached to the Sacrament of Baptism and the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, that does it; then one feels it, as the rushing of the wind is felt. When the Word is heard, then we feel its sound before our ears.”
(LW 22:304)



Martin Luther statue (from Canva)

One might say of Luther in these sermons that he is long-winded. That’s usually a demerit. In this case, blessed be he. The sound

I hear as I read is of a pastor breathing the air of holy consolation over the people he's looking at. For all that they are and remain sinners—of that he makes no bones—he tugs them steadily into the joy of trusting God on account of Christ their Lord.

Again, may this be the project of Christ's preachers today.

+ + +

One last startling thought:

In his introduction to Volume 22, Jaroslav Pelikan quotes from a letter Luther wrote to Bugenhagen on July 5, 1537: "I have begun to preach and lecture once more; in fact, yesterday I preached in your place.... Christ lives; and we are Christs—with or without the apostrophe (*Christi sumus in nominativo et genetivo*).” (LW 22:x)

Imagine every preacher being so bold in Christ as to grasp that they *are* Christ when they stand in the pulpits their Lord has placed them in. God grant this too.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
A publication of the Crossings Community

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

—

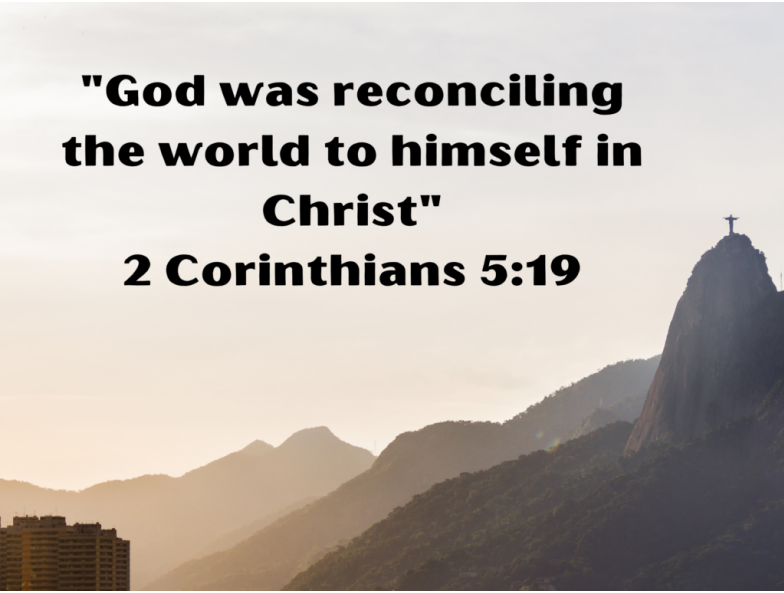
Some Thoughts on Christian Preaching

by Jerome Burce

+ + +

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.



**"God was reconciling
the world to himself in
Christ"
2 Corinthians 5:19**

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)

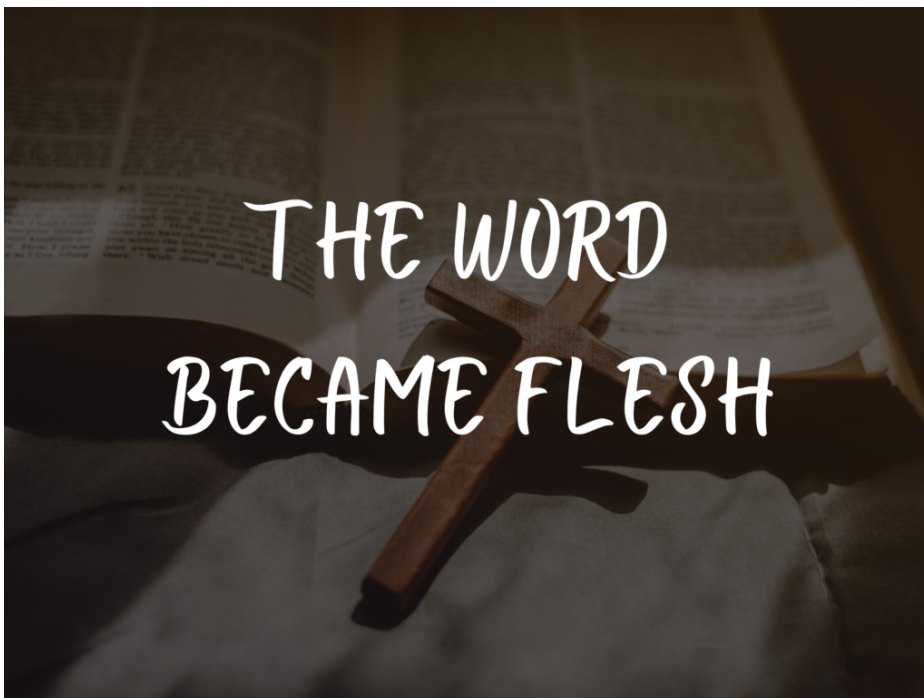
19. Aim always for joy, your own as well as theirs. You have good news to tell. Wildly good. Have a blast in the telling.
20. Talk *to* the people. Not *at* the people. Don't send a stream of words over their heads expecting them to reach up and grab for something useful that maybe, just maybe, will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

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
A publication of the Crossings Community