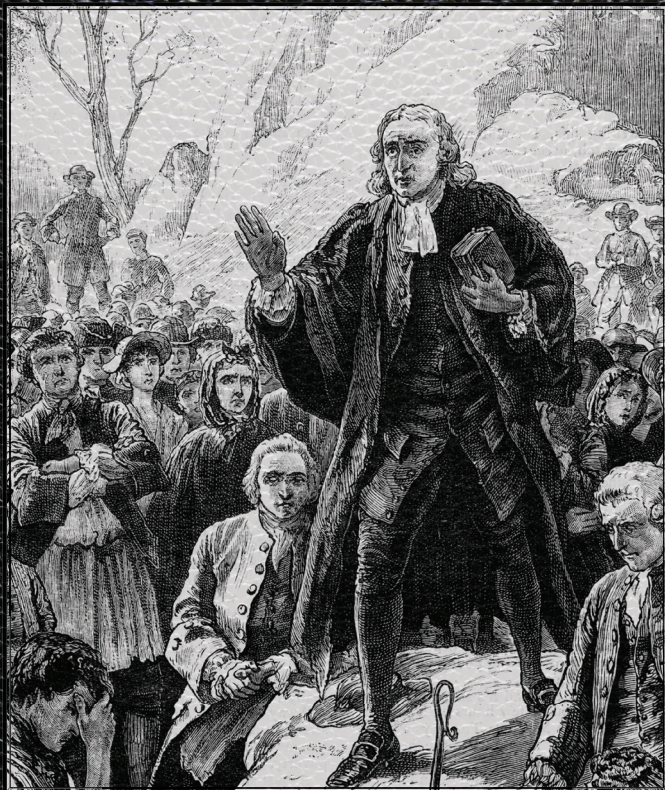


Preaching in the Wesleyan Tradition



DR. LENNY LUCHETTI

A SEEDBED SHORT

PREACHING IN THE WESLEYAN TRADITION

Published by Seedbed: Sowing for a Great Awakening

An initiative of Asbury Theological Seminary



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PART 1:

Keep Preaching

Some are suggesting that preaching has run its course. The proclamation of words from one talking head to a nodding (or sleeping!) crowd for 20-30 minutes or, worse, 40-50 minutes, is a bygone byproduct of a different era when words mattered. The plethora of words we encounter every day, online or in print, has caused words to become meaningless. An internet blogger named Kevin says it all when he writes, “We have hardly had any preaching at Grace Church for the last three years—haven’t missed it!”

Why would anyone keep preaching in a 21st century American context that seems to value preaching less today than ever? While I believe preaching must change in substantial ways, here are a few reasons why I keep on preaching and encourage you to do the same:

PREACHING IS BIBLICAL

According to the biblical story, words matter. God did his best work through words. God formed the world and everything in it through words. For centuries, the Old Testament prophets communicated messages from God to his people essentially through words. The primary ministry of Jesus and John the Baptist was preaching (Mark 1:4, 38; Luke 8:1). Jesus recruited the apostles to preach (Mark 3:14; Luke 9:2). The first century church, according to the book of Acts, focused significant attention on the ministry of proclaiming good news. According to the

Bible, words about, from, and for God proclaimed to a group of people through an anointed person will always be meaningful, relevant, and powerful even when considered passé. That is why we preach!

PREACHING IS A PORTAL FOR GOD

Will Willimon, seasoned pastor and prolific author, reminds us of the impossibility of preaching: “Getting up to preach was like trying to put out a thousand acre forest fire with a garden hose.”¹ Thanks Willimon! Preaching is crazy. Arranging choice words in the right order because of a call from God, knowing full well that those words are dead bones unless God speaks through them, is utterly ridiculous. While we study and work diligently in our homiletic craft, we recognize that the power of preaching is more dependent on God showing up than the preacher.

Ironically, the ridiculous nature of preaching may be the very rationale in support of its ongoing practice in the life of the Church. The practice of preaching reminds us over and over again that God can accomplish the impossible through impossible methods and means, that he just might decide to show up through the so-so words of a so-so preacher and transform so-so people into disciples who change the world! Just like he comes to us through the common bread and wine of Communion, so God comes to us through common words strung together by some common being we call preacher. That is why we preach!

PREACHING SETS PEOPLE FREE

Preaching inspires middle aged women and men to leave lucrative careers in order to go to the most frightening places in the world

¹ Will Willimon, “The Power of Mere Words,” *A Voice in the Wilderness: Clear Preaching in a Complicated World* (Sisters: OR: Multnomah Press Books, 1993), chapter 15.

to build schools, hospitals, and orphanages. Preaching does that! Preaching rescues couples whose marriages are hanging by a thread so that instead of calling it quits they hold on “for better or worse” and begin to thrive. Preaching does that! Preaching brings hope to a lonely and lifeless teenager so that she resists the temptation to commit suicide. Preaching does that! Preaching causes a high school drop-out alcoholic to believe that God just might use him as a pastor. Preaching does that! Maybe we haven’t seen as much liberation as we long to see, but perhaps we’ve seen it often enough to convince us that preaching still has the power to set captives free by proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor (See Luke 4:14-21). That is why we preach!

PREACHING PURIFIES THE PREACHER

The practice of preparing and presenting sermons on a regular basis has done wonders for my soul. God often uses the practice of preaching to breathe the winds of hope back into the deflated sails of my life. The act of preaching has, over and over again, given me the audacity to believe what I am tempted to stop believing about God, myself, and the world. Preaching helps me to imagine a whole new world that is more real than the “virtual reality” within which I am sometimes compelled to live. The call to preach stimulates my movement toward love and away from self-centered narcissism. I’m still not “all that,” but you should have seen my life before the practice of preaching laid its hands on me!

CONCLUSION

I know I’m preaching to the choir. Maybe you don’t need to be convinced that every moment you spend preparing to deliver your sacrament of words, as heart-wrenching and nerve-racking as it is, will be well-worth the blood, sweat, and tears you pour into the homiletic task. I, on the

other hand, need convincing at times. Does preaching still matter? If you're a preacher, you better believe it!

EXERCISES

1. Which one of the reasons for the ongoing practice of preaching listed above is most compelling to you and why?

2. What are some other reasons for the ongoing practice of preaching in the life of the local church?

3. Reflect on how preaching has changed your life. What impact has the practice of preaching had upon you and/or through you?

PART 2:

The Difference of Wesleyan-Methodist Preaching

While there are many preaching streams that feed into the river of the Christian movement, we will investigate here the unique impact of the Wesleyan-Methodist tributary. We will navigate this body of water with the help of prominent theologian Albert Outler. He locates four lenses through which John Wesley developed his theology: Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason. These lenses will guide us in exploring the impact of Wesleyan-Methodist preaching.

SCRIPTURE

Let's start where Wesley starts- with Scripture. When I think about the biblical base for Wesleyan-Methodist preaching, I am drawn to a phrase that comes out of the Exodus Event. When God decided to pick a people to be his very own, a group through whom he would bless all the nations of the world, he chose oppressed Hebrew slaves who had been in bondage for more than 400 years. And God used a prophetic preacher named Moses to get the exodus ball rolling. Once the people are liberated, God says to them through Moses, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt so that you would no longer be slaves to the Egyptians; I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you

to walk with heads held high” (Lev. 26:13). God did some chiropractic work by breaking bars and lifting heads, giving an undignified people the dignity that comes from right relationship with him.

In the New Testament, those Hebrews found themselves in a familiar kind of mess. This time they were in bondage, not in Egypt, but on their own Palestinian turf to the Romans. And God raised up another emancipator, a prophet-preacher like Moses, named Jesus. In his inaugural sermon, Jesus shows his preaching cards by quoting Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). Jesus had a chiropractic mission just like Moses. The preaching of Jesus, according to Jesus, was focused on breaking bars and lifting heads, giving oppressed, down-trodden people a new dignity that would come not from the political policies of Rome, and certainly not from the Jewish aristocracy, but from participation in the Kingdom of God through relationship with Christ.

Through the preaching ministry of Moses and Jesus, people whose heads hung low in disgrace, defeat, discouragement, and despair start walking with their chin up, with heads held high in hopeful belief that they could by God’s grace become something- a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a blessed nation through whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed, a church that partners with God in the *missio Dei*. The preaching of Moses and Jesus caused these kicked-to-the-curb Jews, oppressed by mighty Egypt and Rome, to view themselves and their world through the lens of the kingdom of God, a kingdom in which the first are last and the last first, where the poor have a place, and those with regrets can start over. And that’s what Wesleyan-Methodist preaching does!

TRADITION

As we move from Scripture to Tradition in our exploration of the distinct impact of Wesleyan-Methodist preaching, it makes sense to focus on the ministry of John Wesley. Wesley, like Moses and Jesus before him, was a bar breaker and head lifter. He was a member of the Anglican Church, a social club for the English elite at the time. The Church was not a welcome place for underdogs like the poor peasants losing their jobs to machines during the Industrial Revolution and washing away their troubles with alcohol. They had no hope and no help, especially from the church. So Wesley, this well-educated Oxford don and high churchman, senses with Moses and Jesus a burning call toward his people in order to “break the bars” of their yoke and cause them to “walk with heads held high.” All of a sudden, jobless and hopeless alcoholics are being liberated and sanctified to serve the purposes of God. Black women are leading class meetings. Wilberforce is seeking the abolition of slavery. Slave-born Richard Allen is set free and sets others free through Gospel preaching. Phoebe Palmer, a woman, gets up the nerve to travel as an evangelist and proclaim good news. All of this because a guy named John Wesley, anointed by God’s Spirit, had the compassionate courage to preach in a way that broke bars and lifted heads. And they walked with heads held high, their spine straightened by Jesus the Chiropractor, the glory and the lifter of our heads! Preaching got that ball rolling, and justice rolling with it like a river! Because that’s what Wesleyan-Methodist preaching does!

EXPERIENCE

Our personal experiences can also help us get a grip on the distinct impact of our preaching tradition. Therefore, I’m going to get a bit testimonial-it’s a Wesleyan-Methodist thing! Here is how God stirred in me this notion of preaching as a ministry of breaking bars and lifting

heads. By the time I turned 16 years of age, I was pretty down and out. I found myself burdened with the bars of a yoke that kept my head hung low. My parents were battling an addiction to heroin and cocaine. Drug addiction swallowed them up. We lost our house, car, and, worst of all, our dignity. I was labeled the son of drug addicts who would never amount to much. So, I lived into this shame and inferiority. I became, at the age of 16, a high school drop-out alcoholic. The bars of my yoke were suffocating me.

Through a variety of circumstances and people, too detailed to chronicle here, God got a hold of my life when I was 18 years of age. I experienced the words of Charles Wesley's And Can It Be, "long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night, thine eye diffused a quickening ray, I woke the dungeon flamed with light. My chains fell of my heart was free, I rose went forth and followed thee." God broke the bars of my yoke and caused me to walk with my head held high primarily through the preaching of others. Though the details of your experience are surely different, God broke the bars of your yoke and he caused you to walk with your head held high. He did this to us so that he, through us, can do it for others. That's what Wesleyan-Methodist preaching does!

REASON

Finally, we explore the impact of Wesleyan-Methodist preaching through the lens of Reason. I'm not sure any of this is real reasonable; it doesn't make sense that God would choose to come alongside of underdogs like Egyptian-oppressed Hebrews, or Roman-oppressed Jews, or English peasants, or a down and out teenager. I'm not sure any of this is reasonable, until we realize that this is exactly how God works over and over again; it is his MO! Once we get to know God we realize "his ways are higher than our ways," his reason beyond our reason. But we can begin to

see a pattern emerging with God. He empowers a mouthpiece—a Moses, a Jesus, a Wesley, and you! And through the proclamation of good news to people starving for good news, people are raised to a whole new level of living according to God's economy of scale. God has called the likes of us to preach in a manner that breaks the bars and lifts the heads of people by connecting them to Christ. Could there be a more reasonable reason to give our very lives to this task!

Faithfully proclaimed messages by preachers whose lives embody the good news they preach is chiropractic. It is not some American dream, political ideal, or ecclesiological well-wishing, but Jesus Christ unleashed and untamed who breaks bars and lifts heads! That's what Wesleyan-Methodist preaching does!

PART 3:

How a Wesleyan- Methodist Preacher Prepares a Sermon

When I began preaching on a weekly basis I was awe-struck by the astonishing privilege and daunting responsibility of proclaiming the Gospel. The high calling to preach seemed to have a sanctifying affect upon my soul. “Get God or get out” was my thinking. I was more reliant upon God throughout the homiletic process than upon my limited abilities. Prayer and fasting guided me as I wrestled with God for insight into the coming Sunday’s text. My need for God was as inescapable as my need for air. Preaching was for me, in the earliest days of my ministry, a spiritual discipline that cultivated a deepening faith in the God whose guiding and anointing I sought intensely.

Then, a strange thing happened. The more I preached, the more comfortable I became with my increasing skills. I began to pray less. Sermon development and delivery was reduced from a spiritual discipline to a technical task. What I once viewed as an opportunity to engage and be engaged by God became a task to be completed. This change in perspective eventually diminished for me the joy of preaching and its spiritually formative impact upon me. Homiletic fatigue and symptoms of pastoral burnout surfaced often.

As Wesleyan-Methodists, we believe that the person doing the preaching matters. While God can speak through anyone or anything, including Balaam's donkey, he tends to speak most profoundly and consistently through preachers who are yielded to and sanctified by the Holy Spirit throughout the homiletic process. A Wesleyan-Methodist sermon preparation process will be infused with spiritual disciplines that foster the preacher's connection and submission to Christ. Here are a few practices that can help a weary preacher reclaim the joy of preaching as a spiritual discipline.

COMMENCE WITH PRAYER

Before you begin to study the text from which you will preach, pray a small portion of Psalm 119 slowly and reflectively. Ask God for revelation and insight into His word. Quiet your soul by sitting before God and allowing him to remind you of his love for you and the important calling he has placed upon your life to proclaim Christ. Ask God to purify your preaching motives and to spiritually form you to become the "fragrance of Christ" through the homiletic process.

TAKE A PRAYER WALK

Take a walk around the church campus, your neighborhood, a nearby park or some woods looking and praying for God's glory, for His kingdom to come "on earth as it is in heaven" through the sermon. Prayers that make mountains move often find clear expression when our bodies move. Plus, a short walk gets the blood flowing and the creative homiletic juices with it.

JOURNAL A PRAYER

Spend a few moments looking prayerfully through your church directory. Reflect on how the biblical text for the sermon might address

the dreams and disappointments, hopes and heartaches, and victories and vices of the people in your congregation. Prayerfully consider how God wants to comfort and/or challenge the church through this text. Then, write a prayer to God that reflects your hopes and his will for the sermon. Pray this prayer throughout the week leading up to the preaching event.

DEVELOP PRAYER TEAMS

Recruit a Pre-Service Prayer Team to pray with the preacher before the worship service. Develop a Preaching Event Prayer Team to pray while you are preaching. Finally, empower a Post-Service Prayer Team to pray with people who respond to the sermon.

Wesleyan-Methodists believe that God does his best work not just through good sermons but through good preachers. Infusing the homiletic process with spiritual disciplines has the potential to develop faithful preachers who preach fruitful sermons. Too many preachers struggle to maintain healthy devotional habits because of the rigors of the preaching life. “I don’t have time for a devotional life when I have all these sermons to write,” they confess. What if the process of developing and delivering sermons was as devotional as it is rhetorical? For Wesley and the Christ he served, it was!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lenny Luchetti has spent 15 years serving as a pastor in small, midsize, and large churches in various contexts. He has sensed God's call to invest his life in pastors who are investing their lives in the local church. In July 2010, Lenny began serving as Professor of Proclamation and Christian Ministries at Wesley Seminary, a graduate school of Indiana Wesleyan University. In May 2010, he received a Doctor of Ministry degree through Asbury Theological Seminary's Beeson Pastor program and wrote his doctoral dissertation on "A Journey in Preaching as a Spiritual Discipline."

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