

PREACHING FOR TRANSFORMATION

When you preach, do you expect something to happen? Do you hope for a few good comments at the door and a few approving nods from your worst critics? Or, at the end of your 17-22 minutes with the congregation do you pray that something you said will start a chain reaction of thought and action that transforms the lives of worshippers?

Things happened when Jesus preached. The masses flocked to hear Jesus preach about how to live in community with one another and how to live into what God expected of them. Most of the time, his sermons were well-received, but there were times when his detractors wanted to throw him over a cliff! Neither changed his message. His goal was clear: the re-formation of humanity in the image of God.

Think of preaching as multi-functional. Most agree that preaching calls people to repentance and to community. Walter Brueggemann suggests that an additional goal of prophetic ministry, after which much of our preaching is patterned, is to evoke and orient an alternative community that is grounded in Christ.¹ This alternative community, which we call the church, marches to the beat of a different drummer. Preaching orients hearers to new life in the Christian community. Preaching helps the congregation understand and embrace Christian lifestyle.

Preaching is a tool of transformation. In traditional approaches to the sermon, the pulpit was seen as a lectern where les-

sons were “taught” from or about the Bible. Variations on that approach included sermons with the iconic three (teaching) points and a poem, during which worshippers were often encouraged to take notes to facilitate study after the service. These cognitive approaches presuppose that the worshipper’s greatest need is to learn *about* the Bible for effective Christian living. However, we are learning that while approaching *pulpit as lectern* may result in “smarter” Christians, we are experiencing a clear call from the pews for something more: more discipleship, more commitment, and a deeper relationship with God.

Recent preaching trends toward more narrative sermons—making judicious use of stories and illustrations—have been for some a refreshing shift from emphasizing only the *thinking* side of faith to include the *feeling* side. Transformational preaching is grounded in the assumption that the goal of a sermon in a service of Christian worship is both *informational* and *formational*. We learn about the faith and we are also challenged to embrace the ethos of Christian living.

HOW SHALL THEY HEAR WITHOUT A PREACHER? (Ro. 10:14)

Preaching is one of the most important things that you do. From the day of the Resurrection until this day, preachers have played an important part in the Christian’s story. Christian communities consider the proclamation of the Word of

God, alongside the administration of the sacraments, to be among of the most defining acts of the church. One has only to think of Peter's sermon to the amazed crowds on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 or subsequent sermons from Paul to remember that the Early Church considered preaching an integral part of its existence.

The biographies of both Peter and Paul reveal commonalities: they both preached to change the world through the message of Jesus Christ, and they both had experienced spiritual transformation. It is easy to identify how and when Paul began his journey of transformation. An overzealous Paul (originally Saul of Tarsus) had a direct encounter with the Risen Lord on the Damascus road that changed his life forever. But what about Peter's?

Your personal transformation makes you an effective witness of the transforming power of God.

Peter's transformation was probably more like most of ours – slow and gradual, punctuated with highs and lows. We cannot identify exactly when or how, but Peter was changed from a man willing to lie to save his own life in the courtyard on the night that Jesus was betrayed (*I do not know the man*, from Matthew 26:74) to a person boldly proclaiming the Resurrection months later on the day of Pentecost.

Your personal transformation makes you an effective witness of the transforming power of God. Preachers who have been transformed – whether suddenly and unexplainably like Paul, or gradually and decisively like Peter – are best equipped to lead others in transformation. Your personal transforming encounter with the texts you preach each week is more important preparation for your sermon than

oratory skills, technique, or the style or form that your sermon takes. Members of your congregation are generally not as impressed by the dazzle of presentation as they are by the sincerity and integrity of messenger and message.

LET'S BE REALISTIC ABOUT OUR PRESENT CONTEXT

Toto, We're Not in Kansas Anymore!
Christianity and church attendance are no longer the glue that holds most communities together. Western culture has changed to such an extent that we are now describing our era as *post-Christian*. The habit of weekly church worship now competes with leisure, work-related, or school-related pursuits too numerous to mention. And, those who attend church regularly are often preoccupied with how long they are present.

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We often only have fifty-nine minutes and fifty-nine seconds of contact with a parishioner for the entire week. Recent (2009) United Methodist membership statistics place worship attendance at 41% and church school attendance at 34%. Look at how time is spent in worship on a "typical" Sunday in a "typical" congregation:

Order of Worship: *Anywhere UMC, Anywhere, USA*

Three hymns?	15 minutes
Welcome & Announcements	5 minutes
Liturgy and Prayers?	10 minutes
Offering.....	<u>5 minutes</u>
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>35 minutes</i>
Then add: Sermon, Sending	17-25 min
<i>Worship Total:</i>	<i><u>52-60 minutes</u></i>

But what happens to the sermon on the Sundays that are not typical? Time restraints often dictate that baptisms, Communion, presentation of Bibles and other special events take place within those same sixty minutes. On those Sundays, many sermons are reduced to 7–10 minutes! This makes it imperative that 21st century sermons be intentionally focused, purposeful, and integrated into the entire worship experience.

Protestant preachers have been conditioned to think of the sermon as the most important part of worship. This same line of thought made it easy to view songs, creeds, prayers, and liturgy as “warm-up” for the main event, which would be the sermon. Oh, but worship can be so much richer than that!

What if the *entire* worship experience “preached” the morning message? What if the sermon, the songs, the prayers, and even the music used in liturgical dance all conveyed the same transforming message? Think of music, liturgy, and worship arts (dance, drama, etc.) as an *extension* of the message. A well-coordinated worship experience makes it possible to weave themes from the sermon throughout worship and often make retention easier for a congregation of people with diverse learning preferences. (For more on this, read the most recent [Guidelines for Worship Planning](#).)

BASICS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL PREACHING

There are several basic steps that you can take to prepare yourself to discern transformational themes for your sermon:

Listen to the Text

Meditate on the text. Listen to the words as though they were spoken directly to you. What do you hear? How do you feel about what you hear?

Study the Text in Context

Remember who, what, when, where, how. Often a text makes more sense when we realize who the primary characters are, what the pressing situation involves, the times, and the options for response available to those people in those times. Explore the basics about the text and make sure you understand why it was written and why it was preserved in the Bible.

Stay Alert for Theological Issues!

Don’t ignore uncomfortable issues or challenges. Members of your congregation may be distracted by these if unaddressed. It could be liberating for them to hear you admit that the passage troubles or challenges you too and is a transformational issue for all of you.

Explore Transformational Themes

What is the text asking you to feel, believe, be, do, or change? What does the text reveal about God’s relationship to humankind? When you reread the text, what is it saying to you, as a child of God and a follower of Christ? Then, re-read the text with your congregation(s) in mind. How might the issues raised in this text be helpful or challenging to them? Do the implications of this text collide with a recent community or church-wide happening? (Remember to preserve confidentiality.) Does the text offer comfort, hope, or challenge?

Translate from the Old/New Testament to the NOW Testament

Jesus was known for the simplicity of using common knowledge to explain obscure truths. What language and concepts will you use to communicate the central message of the text that your faith community will recognize and understand? What would Jesus say to people living in an affluent community? How would Isaiah prophesy to the rural South? How would Paul teach in the Heartland? The Northeast? Urban areas?

In your approach to the text, think both local and global. There are some human circumstances that are common to *any* people in *any* location, and sometimes in *any* era. Then, there are human circumstances that are more location-specific and time sensitive. For example, imagine the sermonic challenge of pastors in Louisiana preaching after Hurricane Katrina, or of pastors in the Heartland preaching after the 2011 spring floods. What words of encouragement or grace does your text offer to people who are still being battered by the financial meltdown that began in 2008? How does the text challenge the rich and complacent? How might single-parent families hear the text? Or farmers; or factory workers? How does the text speak to the homeless in your midst?

Trust the Text

In a rare moment of private conversation Walter Brueggemann, one of our generations' premier teachers of preachers, was asked if he had a word of advice to share with the preachers that we serve. Without hesitation he replied: "Trust the text!" He went on to point out that lengthy illustrations and other distractions tend to reveal that the preacher is unsure about how the text will be received or is perhaps personally unsettled by the text. One beauty of the biblical texts lies in the text's ability to speak to all of God's people at the same time without compromise or contradiction.

Some texts sound harsh or contain an ethic that some consider impractical for our century. As we translate the context of the Old/New Testament to the NOW Testament it is vital that we not second-guess the biblical text by sanitizing or softening language or implications to fit present-day listening styles. It has been aptly suggested that we not *turn wine into water*. Sermons that transform are frequently challenging for both preacher and hearer. Resist the temptation to run from this challenge.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

A Catalyst for Larger Conversations

Your skillful proclamation of the biblical text may well serve as an incentive for members or visitors to join a small group dedicated to examining a similar topic. Anticipate the questions that members of your congregation may have about applying your sermon to everyday life. For example, a sermon on the seriousness of discipleship may spill into a book discussion group on Bonhoeffer's classic *Cost of Discipleship*; a sermon on the gifts of the Holy Spirit may lead to an afternoon opportunity to take a spiritual gifts inventory and discern opportunities to offer those gifts in local church ministry. A sermon on prayer may serve as a catalyst to form a new prayer group. You may never adequately cover a discipleship topic in a single sermon or sermon series but you certainly have the ability to whet the congregation's appetite for more. Modern worshippers make room for the things they care about and that interest them.

Preach Several Sermon Series

Sermon series are an excellent way to preach for transformation. A sermon series is almost like a serial Bible study that takes place in worship on Sunday morning. A series of sermons on the same or similar themes provides an opportunity for worshippers to explore one particular aspect of discipleship. If the titles and the texts for the entire series are announced before the series begins, serious Bible students will often study those texts with you. Couple that with a study group on the same subject – either during or after the sermon series—and transformation will surely begin! Several prominent pastors offer members of their congregation a small group opportunity to study the texts used for preaching weeks before or a week after the sermon, with the pastor/preacher.

Be Pastoral and Theological

We have come to think of pastors as counselors, administrators, community leaders, and friends; but the pastor is also a resident theologian. What might happen if pastors decided to move this role up the priority ladder by embracing the sermon as an opportunity to strengthen congregations and local communities theologically?

Some congregations are marvelously literate in the Bible. They know the basic Bible stories and can tell you where to find key verses, but are at a loss as to how to apply their knowledge. Others know little more than John 3:16 but are highly committed to love every soul, good or bad, rich or poor, acceptable or unacceptable who walks through their doors. If these two congregations shared a pastor, the first congregation would need to hear a sermon on how to apply the text; the second would need a sermon that broadened biblical knowledge while teaching how the text relates to daily life.

Kennon Callahan, in an older volume titled *Preaching Grace*, suggested that pastors do more visitation to improve their sermons. He went on to say that in the act of getting to know our parishioners as people (and not as the objects of our ministry efforts), we come to know what they need, what they know and understand, and how our sermons might address what is lacking in their spiritual lives.

Stress Transformational Themes

In a recent GBOD initiative, participating congregations examined several key Christian texts in depth. Over a period of two years, they found the themes from these texts instrumental in constructing a discipleship system suitable for their individual congregations.

- **The Great Commandment** – Matthew 22:37-39 – Love of God and neighbor underscores all our activity.

- **The Great Redemption** – John 3:16 – We approach our work understanding that each human being, community, and situation has redemptive possibility.

- **The Great Commitment** – Matthew 16:24 – We willingly surrender to God in both worship and work.

- **The Great Requirement** – Micah 6:8 – We seek always to do the right thing, even if it is not the easy thing.

- **The Great Commission** – Matthew 28:19-20 – Our commission and joy is to bring others into the fellowship of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

The transformational themes that you choose to preach from may come from the texts you use in your own personal prayer and Bible study or from texts suggested by the Revised Common Lectionary. The important thing is that preaching be for formation, not just information.

Remember the Story

In Acts, Peter and others spilled out of the upper room to tell a faith-defining story. They told versions of it in the courtyard of the Temple and in the courtrooms of the Sanhedrin. They told it to groups of eager listeners from house to house. They even told their story as they were being run out of town! Christians have found value in remembering their story for more than 2,000 years.

What is our story? One way of looking at the Christian Story is to look more deeply for the transformational aspects in the incarnation, life, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.

- **Incarnation** – As incarnational people, how do we make Christ known in the world today?
- **Life** – How do we imitate the life of Christ in our everyday lives?
- **Passion** – Under what conditions are we willing to suffer for one another or for Christ?
- **Death** – Think of Paul’s words: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:19-20).
- **Resurrection** – What does it mean to be raised (from death) with Christ? What is new life?
- **Ascension** – What does the ascension suggest about how we live today?

Preach With Your Congregation(s) in Mind

We do not preach in a vacuum. We preach among people who have some history with God and with the church. The church has a story and your gathered community of faith has a story. Think of people in the pews who have inherited faith stories from the Great Depression, or learned to trust God in new ways through the 2008 Recession. Preach with your eyes open to ways that the story of faith continues to have implications for the rest of our story both locally and globally. There are times

when the text is so universal that it need not be translated into our present context but more often than not the preacher is both proclaimer and interpreter, alert to the places where the biblical text and the community text meet to inform our discipleship. Transformational preaching takes place somewhere in the intersection between *the* story of faith and *our* story of faith.

CLOSING

The goal of transformational preaching is changed hearts and lives. Think of 21st century preaching as a starting point in strengthening or rebuilding the congregational discipleship system. Through preaching, those outside of the church experience something of the good news we believe, and those inside of the church receive nurture, comfort, instruction, and encouragement in living the faith. When you preach, expect something to happen! Preach for transformation.

¹Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001). See especially, Chapter One: "The Alternative Community of Moses," pages 1-20.

Check out the Sermon Worksheet on page 8.



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SUGGESTED READING

Online: *Lectionary Preaching Helps* on GBOD.org www.gbod.org/lectionary

Allen, Diogenes, *Spiritual Theology* (Cowley Publications, 1997). The major thesis of this volume is that western Christianity has pushed spiritual theology to the sidelines and favored academic theology – to our detriment.

Brown, David M., *Transformational Preaching, the Basics*, (Virtualbookworm, 2010). The lengthier *Transformational Preaching, Theory and Practice*, containing much about learning theory and communication theory, has been shortened and made more accessible.

Brueggemann, Walter, *The Prophetic Imagination*, (Augsburg, 2001). A classic that describes the task of the prophet/preacher: to summon and nurture people in the alternative community of God – one with a different ethos from that of the larger culture.

Childers, Jana and Clayton J. Schmit, eds., *Performance in Preaching, Bringing the Sermon to Life*, (Baker Academic, 2008). This volume is the culmination of twenty years of research on performance in preaching and serves as an excellent primer for venturing into monologue, drama, or the arts in the sermon presentation.

Edwards, O. C. Jr., *A History of Preaching* (Abingdon, 2004). This comprehensive volume traces the history of preaching and the formation of homiletic from the Early Church to the present. Chapter 10 has several articles about preaching and spirituality.

Guidelines for Leading Your Congregation 2009-2012: Worship, The Gifts of God from the People of God (Abingdon, 2008)

Law, Eric H. F., *The Word at the Crossings, Living the Good News in a Multicultural Community* (Chalice Press, 2003). For spiritual transformation, diverse communities frequently need different approaches to the same gospel. Eric Law has done an excellent job of challenging some of our less helpful assumptions about preaching in the context of a multicultural community.

Long, Thomas G., *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, (Westminster John Knox, 2009). Long does a masterful job of translating the text from the Old/New Testament to the NOW Testament through the use of story. It is a great text on the power finding intersections between the biblical narrative and stories of present-day people of faith.

Lundblad, Barbara K., *Marking Time, Preaching Biblical Stories in Present Tense*, (Abingdon, 2007). Lundblad is a master at helping us see the story of God in the stories of ordinary people. Her honesty and creativity in wrestling with some of the texts that preachers find difficult is both refreshing and instructive.

Troeger, Thomas H. and H. Edward Everding Jr., *So that All Might Know, Preaching that Engages the Whole Congregation* (Abingdon, 2008). Troeger addresses multiple intelligences and differences between children's and adults' ways of knowing. Readers will be well-equipped to reach others with the timeless message delivered in relevant ways.

Westerhoff, John, *Spiritual Life, the Foundation for Preaching and Teaching* (Westminster John Knox, 1994). Westerhoff addresses the importance of spirituality to our teaching and preaching and provides practical ways for preachers and teachers to be more aware of their spiritual well being.

SERMON WORKSHEET:

Date: _____ (be aware of significant dates on the Christian calendar, the cultural calendar and/or the local calendar and how they may impact worshippers)

Text: _____

Finding the Theme:

- **Read** the text several times meditatively. Read the text aloud. Read the text in several translations. What is happening in the text? Whose is the strongest voice in the text? Which characters seem most like you? Which characters seem least like you?
- **Study** the text in its own context. To whom was the text written? Is this text significant in the cultural history of the people to whom it was addressed? What were the political or social implications of the text when it was written? Which genre of biblical literature is it?
- **Identify** transformational issues present in the text. For example: in the Exodus account, transformation was an issue for all involved. Moses was required to change in order to respond to God's call, the children of Israel were being asked to take a journey that required transforming faith. Even the Pharaoh was given an opportunity to be transformed.
- **Translate** from the Old/New Testament to the NOW Testament. As you think of the many transformational themes that you have identified in your text, choose one that addresses the spiritual needs of your congregation and context. Think outside the box. We are accustomed to preaching about the Exodus from the vantage point of the oppressed, but what about that tiny bit of the Pharaoh in each of us? Eric Law, in his book *The Word at the Crossings*, has suggested that the oppressed may indeed need to hear the text from the perspective of the oppressed but there are times when both the oppressed and the privileged class may need to wrestle with the possibility that the ways they relate to others may actually be more oppressing than liberating.

What Happens After the Sermon?

Normally, we think of a response to the sermon in terms of commitments to Christ, renewal of faith, prayer or a new attitude about the ethos of Christianity. But, perhaps there is more. Does the sermon encourage worshippers to *think, be* or *do* something in different ways? As a response to the Word, invite worshippers to visit one of your existing study, prayer, ministry, or service groups – especially those that relate to the theme of your sermon. If no related group exists encourage the formation of a new group. Before the date you will preach of this sermon, ask someone within the congregation or within your local community to convene a first meeting of this group within weeks of your sermon and continue to invite interested worshippers to meet with this new spiritual formation group in the weeks that follow.

What About the Rest of the Worship Experience?

Earlier, we suggested that prayers, liturgy, music and worship arts ideally relate to the theme of the Sunday sermon. If you have been serving a church for a while, you already know that this is only possible if you provide adequate lead time and invite members of your worship team into the worship planning process. For more on this subject see *Guidelines for Worship Planning* and the online article [“Seasonal Planning for Preaching and Worship”](#) that also provides an adaptable planning grid for your use.