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What Good is Preaching?

A sermon given by
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What good is preaching? We've got a lot of preachers in this congregation; I'm sure it's occurred to you once or twice, what good is preaching? I'm sure it's occurred to all of you once or twice in your lives as you sit here in the congregation or listening on the radio. You thought, I could be putting my sailboat in the water right about now, or I could be sitting out on my back deck reading the morning paper. I could be making a swing with a golf club, and here I am. What good is preaching?

Now, if you're the other Peter who preached on Pentecost Sunday, apparently a lot. Try three thousand souls. Now imagine three thousand baptized on one day. That's, let's see, four sanctuaries filled on one day baptized. Added to the church. Imagine that. Imagine all those pledging units. Imagine, debt be gone!

What good is preaching? Well, if it's a call to action, a whole lot. According to the book of Acts, when Peter finished his oratorical barn burner, in verse 37 at the very end of the sermon, it says that "Men and women were cut to the heart."

They must have been paying attention. They were not twittering, they were not texting, they were not compiling mental shopping lists. They were listening. And after Peter finished preaching his sermon, they all said, "Well, what shall we do?" He told them "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

It was really extraordinary. Here was Peter, the bumbling Galilean, the denier-in-chief, now the man with the golden tongue. He had a tough crowd besides. The same folks were grumbling earlier saying "they are filled with new wine," and now they're eating out of his hand. How did that happen? What was Peter on? He took folks from being crusty curmudgeons to true believers. Every preacher's dream.

Answer: He was on the Holy Spirit. And may it be so for all of us. Here we are with red balloons and red stoles and red banners and red everything. Red for the Holy Spirit. Red for what appeared to be tongues of fire that came and danced over the Apostles' heads. Red for energy and power and transformation and passion and spirit. And red, too, for preaching.

Pentecost is a good day to talk about preaching, not only because preaching is at the heart of the action on this first day of the church, and not only that preaching is a gift of the Holy Spirit, which it is, but also because preaching itself, like the Spirit that enlivens it, is often mistrusted and hard to get your arms around.

What makes for good preaching? In my view good preaching not only points to the Holy Spirit but is of the Holy Spirit. Good preaching not only tells us more about God,

but is more of God. Good preaching is the word of God made flesh and dwells among us.

Now just when I get to complaining about my job, I remember that Saint Augustine preached four times a week. The room, it is said, was crowded with townspeople standing shoulder to shoulder, artisans and fishermen and merchants and magistrates, the baptized, the learners, curious pagans, Jews crowding in to hear the magnetic and engaging preacher

Jesuit William Harmless in a biography takes us inside the basilica of the ancient North African community of Hippo to recreate the excitement when Augustine was preaching. He writes, "They crackled with energy." The word was not merely being taught, but in the power of the Spirit it was splashing in an electric blue arc across the assembly.

What they heard, Augustine insisted, was not a celebrated orator, they heard the word. They heard the word sung, cheered, preached, prayed. God speaks, said Augustine of the whole worship, "all of this is the voice of God echoing throughout the round world."

What good is preaching? Well, evidently if you're Peter or St. Augustine, you might say it's everything. It's the confidence to be able to give voice to the word and the mystery of God. So much so that the word itself, through our word, carries a saving power.

If only we could have that confidence. You see, I think we have a problem when it comes to preaching in our time. "Houston, we have a problem." The problem is that we are losing our confidence. In too many of our congregations today, the message coming from the pulpits is not bold, it's not vibrant, it's not alive with God. The sermons, too often, are not cutting to the heart, as Peter said. They're not cutting it. Period. And it begins with the culture of our time—the skepticism, the distrust of all knowledge that cannot be readily proven and verified. Empirical knowledge.

That quip we hear from Acts referring to the apostles being so caught up in the spirit that they were speaking in their own language, of being "drunk with new wine," reminds me of the way, today, the world dismisses what it cannot understand.

I had a great example to share with you just in this past week. I was speaking at Kiwanis. (Yes, I'm a Rotarian, but I was at Kiwanis this week.) It was on Thursday at the Lawrence Country Club. I came and presented my dog and pony show, my slides of India that everybody has seen a gazillion times. I told them the story about our family sponsoring a child in an orphanage. I even had a picture, a photograph, and I showed them: "Here's me, here's my child. We're in India. This really happened. We're holding hands."

It was a great group at Kiwanis. Lots of questions, lots of interaction. Then an older gentleman said, during the Q and A time, " I've seen those ads in the paper about people sponsoring children in third world countries. But you know, I never thought you had an actual relationship with an actual child." How do you respond to a comment like that? People are so skeptical, so disbelieving. "Look, here's the picture. I was there." I thought to myself, if people are this skeptical, this disbelieving about this

relationship where they can actually see the picture, how much more skeptical are people of God and of the Holy Spirit when they can't see the picture?

You pay me to stand before you and speak of knowledge that cannot be proven. How reasonable is that? I stand here at the intersection of scripture and human experience, the sacramental place between the church and the word, and I pray for God's grace. But who in this skeptical age has the temerity to speak for God? Imagine what it would be like to come and preach from the pulpit if you really believed that God was in the preaching event. Imagine what that would be like. Imagine the fear and trembling that would come over one.

And sometimes it does. When Martin Luther was 23 years old he gave his first mass. Martin Luther on that day was into meltdown. John Todd, the Luther biographer, described the moment. "Suddenly he was overtaken in a flash by an instant identity crisis. How dare he, how could he speak to God. He felt obliterated in the face of the assumption that he was to address God."

It is an amazing, draining work, preaching. Here we are on this beautiful almost-summer morning, and other people have already got their boats in the water, they've already read through half the Sunday paper, they're already taking a swing on the gold course, and here we are sitting in this sanctuary behind stained glass, or listening on the radio. It really comes down to this: either God is with us or we are pathetic fools. I'll say it that strongly. Either God is with us or we are fools.

Who wants to be thought of as a fool?

What's happened in the mainline church these days is that preaching, instead of boldly proclaiming God's activity in the world, telling the Good News that Christ is risen and how the Spirit of Jesus is now exploding even now in our time, binding us together as one tribe of many tongues, races and backgrounds, calling us to ministry of radical hospitality and grace, we've toned it down. We have retreated from these daring epistemological ventures, from asserting that we can discern the hand of God in our lives, reminding us of prophecies of the past which point to the future, filling us with hope.

Listen to what Peter did with his sermon on that Pentecost morning when he repeats the words of the ancient prophecy of Joel. He's doing it because he's trying to paint a picture of what's coming in history, of how God is working in the world. Listen again to Peter's words:

"And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire and smoky mist.

The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day..."

Think about preaching like that. Instead, too often what we hear is a message on "Five Ways to Keep Your Marriage Together," or "Standing up for Peace in a Warring World." There's nothing wrong with that. It's ethical wisdom. It's helpful advice, if that's what you want. If you just want advice then why not stay home? Why not stay home and

read the Sunday paper and the Op Ed column because you can get it just as well there, and probably even better than you can here.

These tame homiletical ventures have, in the words of Presbyterian preacher Tom Long, "The sickly sweet aroma of smoldering incense in a temple from which the deity has long since departed." (Reminds me, "Elvis has left the building.") Frederick Buechner said of such sermons, " Where God is the most missed of all missing persons."

Now, I anticipate what you're thinking and here's the rebuttal. What you're thinking is, "Hey, we live in a time when we've been assaulted by religion. We live in a time when preachers have God on their lips but not in their hearts. We live in a time when literalists comb the book of Revelations for proof for the day, minute and time when the Day of Judgment is coming. We live in a time where preachers have used such speculations to support their unholy view, like for instance justifying the invasion of Iraq." You're thinking, we've come to distrust emotion, the fire and brimstone pulpit getting folks into a lather, and when the lather wears off, then what happens?

In rebuttal, I say to you this: Can our aversion, our repulsion of such styles of proclamation push us back into our heads so far that we dare no longer hear the heart of the Gospel? Dare we at all, mere mortals, speak any more in God's holy name?

The Pentecost story, the narrative of the Christian faith, tells how that saving power of God, so long promised through the Old Testament is now at last tasted and seen in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. It is here tasted on earth as he rises again from the dead proclaiming the power of life out of death. He does not leave the people of God alone, but comes back again in the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit whose substance is love and grace and forgiveness and the promise of new life for everyone.

The Pentecost story is not saying that the world is perfect yet, but it is saying, in the words of Martin Luther King that though the arc is long, it bends toward justice. What we're saying this morning is that the story lives even now, that God even now is exploding into our lives, that we can plan and we can set up outcomes, but God explodes them and enters into the world of our human existence and makes all things new, even the whales and the fishes of the sea and all creation.

I have traveled halfway around the world to discover the hand of God at work in my life. Was I not led by the Spirit to such faraway places to discover a connection with brothers and sisters in Christ who barely have a penny to their names?

As you know, several weeks ago we had here among us one of those people from that faraway place, the principal of the orphanage where some of our families have sponsored a child. Her name was Vatsala and all who met Vatsala will not soon forget her presence.

After Vatsala went back to India, she sent a letter to this church. Her letter reminded me of those letters that another missionary, Paul, wrote to the churches at Corinth and Ephesus, giving them hope for their life together. She wrote this in her letter, "My Mom is doing well and thank you for your concern and prayers. Your members of the congregation are amazing. I praise God for you and your wonderful people. I felt the

spirit of God moving in your church. May he bless you all for being so kind to me during my stay over there. I too miss all of you. Please, thank the congregation on my behalf for being so generous with time and stretching forth their hands to help the needy."

What do you make of a letter like that? The world may think that we are, with our red balloons and our red banners and our red stoles, perhaps pathetic fools. And sometimes we even wonder and question that about ourselves. We can identify with that man from Kiwanis. Is it real? And then we remember, we don't have a God who poses for pictures for proof. But for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, could there be anything more compelling than this letter from this woman who's given her life to the least of these to remind us that the spirit of God is alive in the world, that they shall be known by their fruits.

A child in India is rescued from homelessness. Tonight a Family Promise family experiencing homelessness is coming into our church and we are providing hospitality here all week. We do this not because we're trying to be good people, but because we believe that the future ultimately belongs to God and in that we take comfort and hope.

Friends, I cannot tell you how deeply people need hope in this world today. Why are movies like Slumdog Millionaire so popular? Because people are craving for hope, for a promise that God is alive in our future and in our lives.

Peter's sermon cut to the heart, with the impending sense of time that hung over the crowd on that Pentecost day. He made it known to them that their days were not unnumbered. Isn't the same true for us? Our days are not unnumbered. We can wait till the cows come home to solve all the intellectual riddles. To wait till all the puzzled are unpuzzled. To wait until all the hermeneutical knots are untied. Or, we can sign up. We can make a decision. That's what can happen with good preaching. That's what can happen when the message is not more information about God. That's not what we need. What we need is more of God. And when that happens, it can lead us to say, as it did on that Pentecost Sunday, "What shall we do?" Amen.