Preaching introduction

How to Listen to a Sermon

Welcome. You're here because you're someone with some experience listening to the church's public proclaimers of the gospel. In other words, you've no doubt sat in a pew and enjoyed a sermon or two — it's possible that you've also endured a few.

My name is Ken Sundet Jones, and I've been the preacher standing in the pulpit and, for the last twenty years since becoming a professor, I've also been a regular pew-sitter. I'm pretty familiar with the highs and lows of preaching. Occasionally I've been the unaware vessel for the delivering the highs, but just as often I've been the culprit behind the lows. Let's dig into what preaching is.

A good way to start is to look to Scripture. The evangelist John begins his account of who Jesus is and what he means with these words: "In the beginning was the Word." We can think about the Word as God's very identity being communicated by flowing outward. In Genesis 1, when God says, "Let there be light…and moon and stars, and flying creatures, and creepy-crawlies, and you," that's the Word at work (or at play — if you believe God is that gracious). God speaks, and the Word goes out.

An interesting thing about God speaking "in the beginning" when the heavens and the earth are created is that, in ancient Hebrew thinking, speech can't be taken back. The speaker takes something out of their brain and places it in the brain of another person who now is its custodian. That tells us something about God's Word. It's not random. It's intentional. And it's not self-directed. It goes from mouth to ear. The Word is meant to have a recipient. And because it's a Word from God, the person who hears it ought to be able to count on it being trustworthy and reliable as it is eternal.

There are three ways we can think about God putting himself out for us through the Word. The first is tied to that verse in the first chapter of John's gospel: Jesus is God's Word. He's Immanuel — "God with us." If the Word is God's very self being gifted to you, then Jesus your Lord, who's both fully divine and fully human, is the Word in the flesh. Kind of like chili *con carne*, he's God with meat…and bones and blood and morning breath, who comes to give you what God has sought to deliver to you from the foundation of the world. In the Nicene Creed we confess that he's "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true

God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father." Jesus, the Word of God, really is the be-all and end-all for the Christian church.

The second way of thinking about God's Word has to do with how we become immersed in the story that began with God in creation, continued throughout God's interactions with the ancient Israelites, showed up in the person of Jesus, and went out to all the world through the Holy Spirit's urging. We're brought into that story through the words of scripture — both the Hebrew Bible that we call the Old Testament and the collection of first century writings including the gospel and all those letters that make up the New Testament. When you encounter the text of the Bible, the Holy Spirit uses it to create faith in the God who's been at work for you from the beginning. And it changes it from mere ink or toner on a page, from simple text to a living Word from God.

The third way of thinking about the Word of God has to do with our separation from God and how God remedies the situation. From Adam and Eve forward, we human beings have a perfect record of not only being unwilling to trust a God we can't see but also being unable to do it. But the divine story in scripture tells of a God who doesn't stay hidden and instead shows up: in the burning bush, in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, in the guise of the judges and prophets, and, of course most significantly, in the person of Jesus, the Word of God. Our God keeps showing up in order that we can actually trust God's good will toward us.

One of the most beautiful passages about preaching in the Bible is in Romans 10. St. Paul tells us that saving faith in our gracious God comes through preaching. Here's what he says: "[F]aith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ."

If we're bent away from God and turned in on ourselves, in order to make us people who trust, God steps out of hiding whenever he shows up in the preached Word in the here-and-now. With the Word, God places Jesus between you and everything in the world that seeks to enter your ears with shaky promises and counter-claims. The third way we think about God's Word is just this: it's a human voice proclaiming God's victory over sin, death, and the Devil. It happens whenever one Christian tells another person what Jesus has done. Certainly, it happens in the sacraments and in your pastor's sermons, but it also happens when you let someone else in on who Jesus is for you. The term we use for this angle on the Word of God is *proclamation*.

All three ways of thinking about God's Word get wound together in preaching. A faithful sermon always points to Christ the Word of God. It's crafted with a clear connection to the Word of God in the Scriptures. And it's unambiguous about declaring God's word in the promise of salvation for you on account of Jesus. Knowing this about sermons allows you to think about preaching as something different from a lecture or advice or social media post. It's not the preacher's musings *about* theology or philosophy. It's not a Bible study. And it's certainly not a job description for living a more successful life.

What preachers do is deliver a Word from God, much like the Old Testament prophets. Only because of Christ the Word isn't about something for *you* to do. Instead, it's an announcement of what Jesus Christ has done, is doing, and will do for you. The proclamation of the Gospel is God delivering the best package to your doorstep. The next time you hear a sermon, tell yourself you can expect great things.