

The Sermon

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
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Scripture

Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching, and to teaching.

1 Timothy 4:13

Sermon

It's time for me to preach. But did you ever wonder why there's always a sermon? Well, the church has a rulebook. And, no, I don't mean the Bible. (The Bible is so much more than a rulebook!) No; the church has a rulebook called the Church Order. And there's a rule in that book, and it says whenever we get together for worship, I'm supposed to preach a sermon.

Now, I think that's a pretty good rule. And I'm not just talking about job security! No; it's a good rule because we don't live by bread alone, but by every Word that comes from the mouth of God.

BUT WAIT A MINUTE. If we live by God's words, then why don't we just read Scripture? What do we need a sermon for? Well, even though the Bible is not a rulebook, it does say this to pastors. It says, "Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture and to preaching and to teaching." That's 1 Timothy 4:13. It sure sounds like a rule. And there's a good reason for it.

I wonder if you remember the story in Acts 8 about the Ethiopian who served the queen. He was reading Scripture, the Book of Isaiah. But he couldn't understand what he was reading. (That happens to all of us, doesn't it?) So the Ethiopian needed somebody to explain the Scripture to him. And that's what Philip did. So there was reading, and there was preaching and teaching. And before you could say Mephibosheth, the Ethiopian was ready to be baptized!

Like Philip, pastors are supposed to explain and apply the Scriptures. It's the most important part of our job. It's why the church ordains us. We serve the church by being servants of the Word.

SO WHAT IS A SERMON? A sermon is what happens when a pastor listens to Scripture. A sermon is what happens when a pastor prays over Scripture. A sermon is what hap-

pens when a pastor wonders and waits upon the Lord. A sermon is what happens when a pastor imagines people sitting there: listening, waiting, hoping to hear from God.

But the most important thing is this. A sermon is what happens when the Holy Spirit takes what a pastor manages to say and then uses it to tell you what you need to hear.

That's what happened with the Ethiopian. And it's a holy thing!

Now, what you need to hear, what we all need to hear—it varies from time to time, it varies from place to place. And so a sermon may reveal the brokenness of the world. Or it may reveal the brokenness of our own wills. A sermon may proclaim to sinners the good news of God's forgiveness. Or it may proclaim to refugees the good news of God's justice. A sermon may challenge our thinking. Or it may challenge our behavior. A sermon may encourage us to cry. Or it may encourage us to shout for joy.

But take all those sermons together, and they will ground us in the grace and mercy of God, the grace and mercy we know through Jesus Christ. Because a pastor is a servant of the Word, and Jesus is the Word of God in the flesh.

A SERMON IS A PEOPLE-SPECIFIC THING. A sermon is an attempt to communicate God's Word. And to do it from a specific pastor's personality to a specific congregation's personality. So here at Celebration Fellowship, a sermon is from me to you. And for the sake of the sermon, it matters who I am and it matters who you are.

First Timothy highlights the importance of who the pastor is. "Timothy," it says, "make sure you set an example of godliness. Your speech and your actions and your love and your faith and your purity—all of that together is either going to shape and support what you preach, or it's going to undermine what you preach. All of that is either going to prepare the way for the Spirit's work, or it's going to get in the way of the Spirit's work."

So it's important who the pastor is, what kind of person the pastor is. It's also important who you are, what kind of congregation you are. Your faith, your hope, your love, your humility, your hunger for the Word—all of that together is either going to prepare the way for you to hear what the Spirit is saying, or it's going to block your ears to what the Spirit is saying.

SO IT MATTERS WHO THE PASTOR IS. It matters how the pastor lives, and it matters what the pastor teaches. It also matters who the congregation is. It matters how the congregation lives, and it matters what the congregation believes.

But most important of all, it matters who the Spirit is! And that's a good thing. Because I am a broken person, and so are you. We're all in pieces. You are, and so am I.

We're all in pieces, until the Holy Spirit starts to put us back together. But the Spirit is rebuilding us. The Spirit is reshaping us. And thank God for that! Thank God, because it's our only hope, the renewing, transforming power of the Spirit.

So the Spirit is putting us back together. Yes. But cracks remain. Cracks remain, because the Spirit's work in us isn't finished, not yet. Cracks remain, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. Because the light of God reaches into us through those cracks. And the light of God shines out from us through those cracks.

We are clay jars. And we're broken. But by the grace of God, we're coming back together. And the Holy Spirit has shined a light within us. It's the light of faith. And a sermon has everything to do with that light. A sermon is the light in me shining toward the light in you. And by the Holy Spirit, all that light makes for a beautiful day!

NOT THAT THERE ISN'T DARKNESS. The Holy Spirit and the Word of God have competition in this world. There are deceiving spirits on the loose. There are evil forces on the loose. And their goal is to undermine the Gospel. Their goal is to undermine our faith.

They sow confusion, when the glory of Christ is clear. And they fit us again for chains, when Christ has set us free. But we refuse to listen to their voices. "Not again!" we say. "Not again!"

No; we will listen to the voice of God. We will listen to Scripture. We will listen to the voice of the faithful church. We will even listen to sermons. And always we will listen for the Spirit. And we will not be afraid. Because the Spirit who is in us is greater than the spirit that is in the world.

I wonder what the Spirit is saying to us today.

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Glory and thanks be to God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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