

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, October 21, 2007
Rev. John Tapscott

“A WORD TO THE PREACHER”

2 Timothy 4:2

A common question at a party is, “What do you work at?” It’s a good ice-breaker because most of us, even if we’re now retired, enjoy talking about our work. Before beginning studies for the ministry I worked in insurance for six years, and it’s amazing how many people I find who work in some insurance-related field. It’s gives us some common ground to begin a conversation.

Today I am going to talk to you about my work now. I am going to preach about preaching. Now of course, preaching and sleepiness often go hand in hand. Boring, as some would put it. I heard of one preacher who paused half-way through his sermon to stifle a yawn. That hardly encourages attentive listening in the congregation. Preaching may seem like an odd sermon subject, but the Bible speaks memorably about the act of preaching and the power of preaching.

Last week we starting digging into Paul’s 2nd letter to Timothy. From a Roman prison cell, Paul wrote to Timothy, whom he had trained to be a minister of the Gospel. In today’s passage, Paul is encouraging Timothy in preaching. He wrote “Preach the word, be urgent in and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching.” This was Paul’s word to Timothy; but it’s a word of instruction and encouragement to every preacher in every age. So I’m going to preach to you about preaching, so that you may have a clear understanding of why we preachers do what we do and say what we say. 2nd Timothy 4:2; “Preach the word, be urgent in and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching.”

First of all, Paul says, “Preach the word.”

Now preaching means to proclaim good news and declare it with authority. And what we preach has authority because we don’t preach our own ideas or philosophies. If I preached my own ideas, it would be a lecture, not a sermon. We preach the word of God, explaining it, interpreting it, and applying it to our lives. Someone once asked me “Do you write your own sermons, or do they come from head office or some other source?” Well I do write my own sermons, absolutely. Now I research and study. I draw insights from preachers and

writers I admire, but I am responsible for the final product. The buck stops with me, but it doesn't start with me. The sermon begins with God's word. That is what preachers are commissioned to preach and that's what gives our message authority.

Paul speaks about the nature of God's word in chapter 3 verse 14, "From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof and for correction, and for training in righteousness." Every preacher must come into the pulpit believing that the human words of the Bible are also God's word, given to us by the inspiration and plan of Almighty God. Furthermore, we have to believe that the Scriptures are powerfully adequate to bring people to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and can be used profitably for teaching, for correcting, and for training people in God's way. We believe that God's Holy Spirit attaches himself to God's word as it's preached now, and wings the word to peoples' hearts and minds. If a preacher doesn't have a basic belief in the power of Holy Scripture and the inspiration of Scripture then he or she has no business being in the pulpit.

Billy Graham says that he notices a particular power to his preaching when he quotes Scripture directly. I find that, too. When I let Scripture as it stands be the text of my sermon, the sermon, at least to me, seems to come alive. If I try to restate a Biblical text in my own words, it seems lacking, somehow. So I usually let my text be the exact words of Holy Scripture. "Preach the word," Paul says, "the word of God, the sacred writings".

There are two main reasons we preach the word. The first is to instruct you for salvation. Scripture says that the way to be saved is through faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was born in human flesh, lived a sinless life, died on the Cross for our sins, was buried, rose again on the third day and is now seated at the right hand of the Father in glory. In chapter 4, verse 1 Paul speaks of "Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom." Christ is returning as judge, and one way or another, each human being, past, present and future, is going to stand before him and give an account of themselves. And frankly, the only sure hope we will have on that day is that Jesus died for us and that we trust in him. When Christ appears again as judge of the world, you will be declared righteous if you are trusting Him now as your Saviour. When the saints go marching in to God's eternal Kingdom, you will be counted among them. We preach the sacred writings because they are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" I preach so that when he comes he will find faith on earth, and will find faith in you and in me.

Back in 1974, Nicky Gumbel of Alpha course fame was an atheist and wanted to dissuade two friends who had just become Christians. He began making a thorough study of the Bible

in order to debunk Christianity. One night he picked up a Bible and started reading. He read Matthew, Mark and Luke, and half of John's Gospel. Then he fell asleep. When he woke up, he finished John, and read through Acts, Romans, 1st and 2nd Corinthians. He'd read it all before, but it had meant nothing to him. But this time it all came alive for him. It had the ring of truth. Shortly afterwards, Nicky Gumbel put his faith in Jesus Christ.

Now coming to faith in Christ can happen as you read the word, but it can also happen as you hear faithful preaching of the scriptures. That's one reason we "preach the word."

The other reason we preach the word is so that "the man or woman of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." Before Christ comes again, we are to be doing the good works God has prepared for us to do. Faith saves us, but it is good works which complete us and make us fruitful followers of Christ. God's word teaches us what to do and how to do it. We preach the word, so that you will be complete Christians, equipped for every good work.

So Paul tells Timothy to "preach the word." *He also tells him "to be urgent in and out of season."*

Now there is an urgency to the Gospel message and the invitation to faith. And we must not lose that urgency, no matter what the world thinks of the message. You see, there are high seasons and low seasons in the church's life. There are times when church-going and Christian faith are popular; other times when church is not so popular and people are indifferent to God's word or reject it altogether. England before Wesley was like that - spiritually indifferent and morally wayward. And despite some bright lights like Nicky Gumbel and others, Britain is much like that again today, at least as far as the Christian faith goes.

Is it not also true in Canada today? Except for pockets of spiritual revival this is a low season spiritually in our land. People claim belief in God, but many are practical atheists, because their belief does not shape their lives or their actions to any degree. Oh, we saw an upswing in interest in the Gospel and the church after 9/11, but that has now all faded away. I believe this is a spiritually low season in Canada because we are so successful and secure and comfortable. Unemployment is low, wages are increasing, jobs are secure, stock markets have been doing well. What do you need God for? But this sense of material well-being masks our spiritual need. Paul says in verses 3 and 4 that we can expect times "when people do not endure sound teaching. With itching ears they will accumulate...teachers to suit their own liking. They will turn aside from listening to the truth and wander into myths."

Now the Gospel is about the amazing love and grace of God in Jesus Christ, but the

Gospel first exposes human sin and lostness, and declares that we can't save ourselves. That message is not popular to a generation that emphasizes self-esteem and our ability to save ourselves from whatever ails us. People are itching to hear how wonderful and powerful they are. That's why self-help authors and speakers like Anthony Robbins are so popular. God's call to repentance and faith is not popular in a time when everyone does what is right in their own eyes. After all, who's to judge? Not even God, it seems.

But seasons change. People will recognize their spiritual need again. Revival will come. For the basic human situation before God doesn't change. Nor does the Gospel message. So we must be unfailing in patience and teaching. No matter how large or small the congregation, no matter what the world thinks of the church's message, we preachers are to be urgent in our proclamation of God's unchanging word.

Finally, Paul tells the preacher to "*convince, rebuke, exhort.*"

We preachers are to convince you of the truth of the Gospel. Now God's word carries its own power to convince. It has the ring of truth. And yet preachers are to show that God's word stands on solid ground. Following Easter, Jesus showed himself alive to the disciples with many convincing proofs. So we are to convince you of the Gospel with many convincing proofs. That gives you confidence in God's word and strengthens your faith before the sceptics.

Next Paul says that we preachers are to rebuke our hearers. This may be the most nerve-racking thing a preacher has to do - rebuking, challenging and correcting the assumptions and actions of our hearers. But it's needful, because even sincere and faithful Christians get off-track sometimes. And what makes rebuking possible for the preacher is knowing that it's based on God's word, not the preacher's word, and most importantly, that I apply God's rebuke to myself before I proclaim that word to you.

Finally, Paul says, preachers are to exhort. Preaching is not just proclamation of God's truth; it is also an invitation and an encouragement to do it. The word of God is to be responded to by our trust and our action. So as a preacher I not only proclaim God's word, I invite you and encourage you to do God's word. "Be not hearers of the word only, but doers of the word..."

If you ever wonder what in the world a preacher does, here it is. We are told to "preach the word, to be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching." Please pray that I will be faithful in my task even as I pray for your loyalty to Christ and the Gospel.

