

Keep your. head

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[0:00] Good morning. Welcome to Church of the Advent. If you're here for the first time, this is the time in our service when we typically have a sermon. We spend roughly a half hour looking in depth at one or more of the passages of Scripture that we have just read. But we rarely stop to ask the question in this church, what's the point of this whole part of the worship service? I mean, just to be totally honest, it would be a lot shorter if we cut this part out.

And we could just skip straight to the creed, especially with the fact that now we live in a world where there are so many sermons online, so much digital content out there that we can listen to anytime we want. Why the need to come and to do something like this in person on a Sunday morning?

It would be a lot more efficient if we didn't do it. And then why is it that when you go to one church and then you go to another church and you do it in another church, the way this time is used is vastly different. You might go to one church and you hear somebody talking or teaching about the Bible.

Maybe you go to another church and you hear what sounds more like a political speech or a political rant. You go to another church and there might be a 15-minute reflection on the size of the universe and our place in it.

What is the point of preaching? What are we supposed to be doing with this time and why does it matter? That's kind of what we're going to be looking at this morning. We're going to have a bit of a meta sermon, a sermon about sermons.

[1:28] We're going to have some preaching about preaching, which is not something that we typically do, and I think it's fine that we don't do this a lot. It just so happens that this is what the Apostle Paul is talking about in the passage from 2 Timothy this morning.

Now, what we're going to be focusing on is primarily what happens here, the Sunday gathered worship and the sermon that happens as a part of that. But a lot of what we're going to say could apply to many situations and contexts beyond this room.

I know there are a lot of people with a gift and ministry of preaching who don't necessarily wear collars. And there's a lot of opportunities for this kind of thing to happen outside of Sunday, but Paul's primary emphasis is Timothy's ministry and the ministry of the elders who serve under him in Sunday worship.

And so that's what we're going to primarily be talking about. And I think this is relevant because, as I said, a lot of people don't fully understand what preaching is or why it matters. So that's what we're going to be looking at.

What is preaching? Why do we need it? And then how to receive it. How to receive it. Let's pray. Our Lord and Heavenly Father, thank you for your word.

[2:37] Really, it's your word that we're going to be considering this morning. And because of that, we thank you and we praise you. And we praise you ultimately that what we're doing here doesn't depend or hinge on us, that we're here because you are a God who has initiated.

You're a God who speaks. And we ask for the grace to receive your word. And we pray this that we might glorify you in your Son's name. Amen. So first of all, the question, what is preaching? What we see in this passage is that the nature of preaching, the ministry of preaching, is shaped and determined by the nature of Scripture itself.

The nature of preaching flows out of the nature of Scripture. The Apostle Paul writes in verse 16, All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the servant of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. So what does this tell us? Well, first and foremost, it tells us that Scripture, and by that we mean the words that we now have in the Bible. So the Old Testament was considered Scripture, but then in one of Peter's letters, he refers to the writings of Paul as Scripture.

[3:56] And then in the first few centuries of the church, there's a gathering together of all of the written words that constitute what the church considers to be Scripture.

So all Scripture is essentially the Word of God. That's what this passage is saying. So unlike anything else ever written, Scripture, *graphe*, is uniquely described as being God-breathed. So in one sense, Scripture was written by human authors, dozens of authors over centuries and centuries. But as those authors wrote, God guided and directed their writing through the power of the Holy Spirit in such a way that they wrote His words as He intended.

So one of my favorite ways of talking about the nature of the Bible is it is just like Jesus. It is fully human, and it is fully divine at the same time.

It reflects human authorship with personalities and cultural characteristics, and yet it is also God's Word written as He intended. So in a sense, we can say that God has delegated His authority to the words of Scripture, which makes Scripture very unique.

[5:13] Unlike anything else ever written, this book has the final say on what is real, on what is true. So we don't treat this like we do other old books.

We don't look at this and say, well, this is advice from our ancestors. This is wisdom from the past. These words are uniquely meant to rule the hearts and minds of God's people.

So because of that, Paul goes on to say, verse 17, Scripture is profitable. It is uniquely useful and able to be used to do a number of things by the servant of God, by primarily He has in mind ministers.

We can use the Scripture to do a number of things, and, you know, so teaching, reproving, correcting, training people in righteousness. And if you look down in chapter 4, verse 2, the job of a preacher corresponds to these purposes of Scripture.

So Paul says very strongly, preach the Word. And what does he mean by that? Reprove. That means to name attitudes or behaviors that are wrong, that are outside of God's will.

[6:28] Rebuke. That means calling people to turn away from those attitudes or behaviors. And then the word either encourage or exhort. That means essentially to set people on a new path, set people on a new trajectory.

So Scripture is uniquely able to be used in that way, to reprove and rebuke and encourage and exhort. And as Jesus says to the disciples after His resurrection, as they're journeying toward Emmaus, all Scripture is ultimately about Him.

All Scripture ultimately points to Him. So the goal of all the reproving and rebuking and exhorting and encouraging and training, the goal of all of that is ultimately to drive people toward Christ. It is to set people on a path into the arms of Christ and into the truth of the gospel. That's the ultimate aim of preaching. So based on all of this, here's one definition of preaching that I would submit to you.

Preaching is God's Word spoken through His people in order to do His work in His people. It is God's Word spoken through His people in order to do His work in His people.

[7:49] And by the way, preachers are not exempt from preaching, right? So every sermon preached is a sermon preached just as much to the preacher as it is to those in the congregation.

And most people who preach regularly will tell you before the text ever makes it out, it does a lot of work in here. It is as though my wife has described it as the text or the texts that are coming up kind of descend on the house.

And you sort of live and marinate and operate within those words for days and days and they go to work on you before they ever come out.

And so preachers are not exempt. This is God's Word spoken through His very fallible people in order to do His work in everyone present, right?

So there are some implications for this. Draw out a lot. I'll just draw out a couple so we can move on. Here's implication number one. Preaching is not the same thing as teaching. A sermon is not the same thing as a TED Talk.

[8:57] There's a place for both. There's a place in the church for teaching. We just had the adult ed hour. That's a time for teaching, right? When the kids downstairs right now, they're receiving teaching of some kind.

There's a place for that. But preaching is something distinctly different. The word that we translate preaching, the word *caruso* means heralding, to herald.

You're announcing something. Imagine a herald coming into a town, ringing a bell, making an announcement, and you're calling people to something. You're a herald. So biblical preaching calls people to reflect on attitudes or behaviors that are not in line with God's will.

Biblical preaching calls people to recenter themselves on what is true and real. Biblical preaching shows us our need for Jesus and the gospel. We're heralding.

And so unlike teaching, preaching demands a response, right? It demands a response. So preaching is not the same thing as teaching.

[10:02] Second implication, the job of a preacher is not to share their personal opinions, but to explain and apply God's word to the lives of people, what we call expository preaching, explaining and applying God's word to people's lives, exposing the truth of the text.

And this is extremely important to bear in mind because a lot of churches these days, the sermon is more or less the personal reflections of the speaker. Or when something major happens in the news, a major current event, you know, a war breaks out or someone gets killed, there can be this expectation that we should be able to come to church on a Sunday and the preacher is going to use that time to share their reflections on that event, to address that event and give a commentary on that event.

And those expectations make sense because we live in a culture where the world is full of pundits and thought leaders whose entire job is to offer opinions about various things.

And some of you, that is your job. You are a professional opinion giver and you speak or write or go on the news and you answer questions about things that are happening in the world. So there can be an expectation, why does that happen in church as well?

Now, of course, there is a time and a place for churches to talk about and engage major current events happening in the world. There are all kinds of opportunities to have classes and panel discussions and forums and weekend symposia that cover a whole variety of topics.

[11:35] But that is not the purpose of preaching. That's not how the pulpit is meant to be used. Sermons should be based on God's Word.

In other words, you should be able to see how the main points of the message come from the Bible. That's one of the reasons we print the Scripture being preached on in the bulletin so that even if you left your Bible at home, you can see, is this connected to what this Scripture actually says?

Caveats. Yes, sermons will pull in quotes or illustrations or references from other sources. We see the Apostle Paul doing that very thing in his letters.

And sermons may very well address and speak into current events or issues if the Scripture happens to apply to those things.

But the point is the main points, the main theme of the sermon should come clearly from the Bible, not from the opinions or thoughts of the preacher.

[12:41] And there are a couple of reasons why this is extremely important. First and foremost, the main reason this matters is because if you cannot see how a sermon comes from the Bible, then ultimately, if you sit under that kind of teaching week in and week out, your faith will end up resting on the opinions of a human being rather than on the Word of God.

And Paul doesn't say, my opinions are profitable for proof and rebuke. And he says, God's Word is because God has breathed His Spirit into these words alone, right?

So that's the first thing. Secondly, second reason why it matters that the sermon comes from the Bible and not from the opinions of the preacher? I think I can speak for all preachers here, at least all the ones I know personally.

To be totally honest, most of our personal opinions are not worth sharing. They're not worth sharing. I have a ton of opinions.

If you want to take me out and buy me a beer and ask me my take on this or that, it might take a couple of beers, but I'll get there and we can talk about it, okay? But most of my opinions are not worth sharing because we simply do not have time in a given week to do the kind of deep dive research necessary to develop deep, nuanced, thoughtful, prayerful opinions about all the issues out there.

[14:09] Now, some of you do. Some of you have research assistants. Some of you are experts in your field. That is simply not our vocation. I have lots of opinions, but some of them, maybe a decent number, are pretty under-informed, and they're subject to my biases, and frankly, some of them are half-baked.

So they're not really worth that much. And even if I did have a well-developed approach to this or that cultural issue that I really wanted to talk about, a 30-minute time slot on a Sunday is not nearly enough time to give most of the big issues a fair treatment.

So you're gonna need to give me a lot more time. So based on all of this, I believe that what the Apostle Paul is saying in 2 Timothy about the nature of preaching means that any preacher who uses this time on a Sunday morning to share their personal opinions rather than to teach and apply God's Word is committing malpractice.

That's simply not what preaching is meant to be. So preaching is God's Word spoken through His people in order to do His work in His people. Now, why does preaching matter so much?

And if we read this text, we see very clearly it does matter a great deal. Listen to the strength of Paul's words in his exhortation to Timothy. Listen to this. Imagine somebody saying this to you.

[15:36] I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead and by His appearing and His kingdom preach the Word.

I don't think you can find a stronger exhortation. There are a lot of things that are important. We need to be caring for the poor. We need to be seeking justice and mercy. We need to be, right, there are lots of needs that the church is commanded to address in the world.

But I don't think you will ever find an exhortation this strong in the New Testament. Right? I charge you in the presence of Christ who is right here watching you, right? Christ is my witness, right?

Who's going to judge the living and the dead? Preach the Word. It's a very strong exhortation.

There's an urgency to it. There's an intensity to it. It's as though He's saying, your main job, Timothy, your main priority, if you do nothing else, preach the Word.

Now, why? Here's the reason. Verse 3. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching but will have itching ears or having itching ears.

[16:49] They will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. So here's the diagnosis of the human condition that is very important for understanding why preaching matters so much.

Where does it begin? Where does the problem begin? If you break down what Paul's actually saying, the issue starts within us. It starts with our passions.

The problem is that there are passions inside people. And by that he means, the word is *epithumia*, the things that we over-desire. In other words, things that we desire, love, and crave more than Jesus.

There are these passions, these *epithumias* inside us where we desire and love and trust and hope in things more than Jesus. It's the most important thing. And Jesus is decentered and something else becomes the center of our life.

There are these passions and that makes our ears itch. We get itching ears. We want those passions to be reinforced and justified and inflamed.

[17:57] And so then people get itching ears and so then people gravitate to teachers who scratch that itch. I love hearing that person talk because it justifies and gives validity to my passions.

It makes me feel like I'm right. It makes me feel like I've got it. It makes me feel like I'm on the side of good. It makes me feel like I'm living my life in the right direction. I like that teaching. So we accumulate teachers who scratch that itch.

And then ultimately, Paul says, the result of that is that truth is replaced with myth. What are myths? Myths. Things that, it's us saying, I would rather pretend that I live in this kind of world than to accept the fact that I live in this kind of world.

It's things we would prefer to believe rather than things that we believe because they're actually true. Myths. So here are the implications of this. I mean, Paul is essentially saying, why is preaching so necessary?

Why is biblical preaching so urgent? Maybe Timothy's highest priority? Because without sound biblical preaching, the passions win. The passions will take over.

[19:04] And there's nothing to challenge them. And I think this has only become more and more true in our day. I mean, these days, if you think about the world that we live in, digital media, social media, right, online content, makes it easier than ever to accumulate teachers to suit our passions.

It is effortless to curate our social feeds, to curate the podcasts and content that we consume, to curate our news sources, to curate our friend groups, to really, if we want to, avoid anything that would really challenge our worldview.

And we can make it so that that itch is constantly being scratched by the content that we consume on a weekly basis. We're just constantly feeling good about our choices, feeling good about our worldview, feeling like there are other people that were right and the other people are wrong.

It can just constantly reaffirm how we think. And, friends, that's just the beginning. Right? It's gotten to the point where we don't even actually have to actively curate any of that anymore because the algorithm does it for us.

Right? So the path of least resistance, if you do nothing, is to have it curated for you because every day we're being fed things that inflame our passions because people have learned that if you can inflame people's passions, they'll click and they'll like and they'll respond and they'll engage and you can sell that for money.

[20:34] This has had a major impact on the church. I think one day we're going to look back and the history books are going to talk about the radical impact of everything I just said on the church.

A few years ago, Mike Graham published a landmark article called The Six-Way Fracturing of Evangelicalism. And, essentially, he says, and you should go read it if you haven't read it, but many Christians used to assume, and this is primarily you think about evangelical Christians, used to assume that their unity was mainly theological or missional.

The original meaning of evangelical was a theological definition. A historian named Bebbington actually defined what evangelicals care about, like personal conversion and the authority of Scripture and all of that.

So, originally, that's what it meant, but now, political and cultural alignment has become far more important than theological unity. And as a result of that, the church has become deeply divided. I know couples who have gotten divorced. I know families that have been torn apart and no longer speak to each other. I know churches that have split and fragmented apart, not over theological disagreements.

[21:49] People who all believe the gospel, they all believe in Scripture, they all believe in Jesus, they all believe in the resurrection. They've split over a divergence of political views and ethical priorities and cultural issues and philosophy of ministry.

Right? In the last few years, things have gotten to the point where brothers and sisters in Christ who share the same faith, who believe in the same Christ, who share the same baptism, cannot even relate to one another because there's this cultural chasm that has opened up between us.

So, you're talking to somebody who is a Christian, who believes everything that you believe theologically, and it feels like you're talking to somebody from a different dimension, from a different planet because their view is so radically different than yours on all of these other issues.

Let me ask you a question. This is, I don't want to see any hands here. I just want to know just your honest reflection. We have a section in our church worship. It's coming up called The Prayers of the

People.

And in The Prayers of the People, we take time and sometimes we invite people to pray aloud for the needs of the world. So, this is the time. This is the opportunity for the church to bring anything and everything that's happening in the world that's on our heart to the Lord.

[23:11] Here's my question, two-part question. Number one, have you ever felt inclined to pray for a certain issue or current event and inclined to pray aloud for that?

And it might be something that you're praying for at home, but you hesitate or even don't pray because you're afraid that if you pray for that issue or if you pray for that side of the issue or if you pray in a way where you use certain words that are coded left or coded right, that other people will pick up on that and make assumptions about your politics and judge you?

Have you ever worried about praying for something because it will out you and so you haven't prayed? Have you ever heard somebody else pray for a certain issue and made assumptions about them and judged them or thought to yourself, I'll never be friends with that person because they care about this other side of the issue and not my side?

To the extent that that is true, that should be a warning sign that something is deeply wrong. It should be a wake-up call. As a pastor, I'm deeply, deeply, deeply concerned about the spiritual health of our congregation in a culture like this.

And I think to try to pull the wool over our eyes and pretend like it's not going to impact us is naive. I was with a group of pastors actually a week ago in Montana.

[24:44] We were fishing together. It was wonderful. These are pastors from two or three different denominations and not all Anglican. But it was interesting one night we were sitting around the fire we're talking we realized that over the last few years and I'm talking like since COVID last three or four years we've seen all in our churches.

These are people from all around the country different denominations we've all seen the same thing in our churches. Just in the last few years we have all seen a dramatic shift.

A dramatic shift. Here's what we've seen. Here's what we agreed on. More and more people choose their church home not based on the theology but along cultural and political lines.

That's what we're seeing. We're also seeing this. People are much more likely to leave their church if there is any indication that the church is not aligned with them on these political social cultural issues.

People will leave churches they've been a part of for a decade over a word misspoken in a prayer or a sermon. Third thing we've seen and we've all experienced this.

[25:55] Third thing we've recognized is that whenever there is a major current event that happens we find ourselves caught in a predicament when we think about what does Sunday worship look like. I'm just going to be this is me being totally honest being totally transparent culture we live in this is not a personal indictment of anybody in this room this is a conversation that we had as pastors in another context but we've all seen this that whenever there's a major current event we know we've had to come to accept just in the last few years I didn't see this for about 15 years only in the last few years whatever we do or don't do whether we choose to address that issue or not whatever words we choose however we go about it we know that we're going to lose people and we also know that we're probably going to gain people because there is this sorting that is constantly happening are these people like me or not are these my people or not and we see this everywhere so what I'm saying is that Mike Graham's six way fracturing article really predicted something that I have started to see come true and I think many pastors have started to see come true here's the major prediction of his article is this that people moving forward are no longer going to be willing to tolerate being in church alongside people who hold meaningfully different social or political opinions

I would say that's really started to come true so churches themselves are becoming echo chambers echo chambers so what's the point of this whole diatribe here now maybe more than any time in

history there is an urgent need for biblical preaching because biblical preaching refuses to indulge our passions because biblical preaching refuses to suit itself to the views of the tribe to the views of the base because the aim of biblical preaching is always to disrupt everybody in that room because the aim of biblical preaching is not to suit passions it's to transform passions it's to recapture people who have been led away from Christ believing that other things are more important and if you can't associate with a Christian brother or sister because of their political views

I'm talking about you and the aim of biblical preaching is to call people back to Christ and the unity that comes through Christ alone so for many Christians I think this is just I don't I believe that for many Christians going to church and hearing a biblical sermon aimed at transforming your passions may for many people be the only time in your week where you are exposed to anything that meaningfully challenges your worldview assumptions and that's why you need it and in a church like Church of the Advent where we are committed to remaining and being politically purple that means everyone is probably going to get offended at some point if we're doing it well and I'm not saying we always do it well frankly we're not concerned about your politics we welcome people from the left and the right we know that there are very important significant meaningful issues that we disagree over and we want to work through those things together but we're not really concerned about your politics it's not part of our membership covenant right when you join the church we are deeply concerned about the extent to which your politics may have replaced

Christ at the center of your life and to the extent that we sense that that is the case we're going to come out swinging every Sunday morning so we're going to try to preach in a way that seeks to turn hearts away from whatever stranglehold the culture has on them and back to Christ it doesn't mean the issues don't matter it just means they matter a little less than you think they did so why do we need preaching so urgently because without it the passions take over now lastly I want to spend a little bit of time I don't have much time left but I want to spend a little time talking about how to receive preaching now that's an odd thing to say receive preaching you know well that's an odd way to put it but we don't listen to sermons like we would listen to TED talks as we said a sermon has to be received in the same way that the Eucharist has to be received there's a parallel there right there's a recognition that you need it there's a recognition there's a hunger in you for it and there's a willingness to open yourself up to receive it just as you would receive the bread and the wine as we said before preaching is God's word spoken through God's people to do God's work in his people it has to be received

I love the way Pastor John Ames puts it in the novel Gilead he describes a sermon as one side of a passionate conversation between three parties you know there's the preacher who yields the thought there's the congregation who hears and responds to the thought and then there's God himself and that conversation is always happening so a sermon has to be heard that way the goal friends is not to listen to or only listen to the preacher because your true aim here should be to hear the voice of the Lord so first before the sermon even starts the first thing that you can do to prepare before you even come to church maybe that morning pray and ask the Lord to speak to you through the teaching and preaching of God's word God would you speak to me through the sermon this morning maybe it comes through the preacher maybe friends it comes in spite of the preacher as we become more and more mature as

[32:08] Christians I think the abilities of preachers should matter less and less God is not thwarted by a D plus sermon any more than he has helped by an A plus sermon God can speak!

because God is! and so we're not here looking to be entertained and as we get better at discerning the voice of God as Christians I think we get better at discerning his voice coming to us through the preached word so that's the first thing pray and ask God to speak to you through the preaching of his word number two prepare your heart to hear from the Lord and respond that means having a Martin Luther famously said or infamously said always preach in such a way that if the people listening do not come to hate their sin they will instead hate you that can definitely be misapplied but I think the point is this it's not about being intentionally harsh or intentionally divisive or abrasive it's about being faithful to what is true even when it cuts and good preaching should confront the heart it should strip away self righteousness it should pierce through hypocrisy it should drive people into the arms of

Christ so if you do find yourself in a church one Sunday morning and you do get offended before you write an email or leave the church simply pause and ask where is the offense coming from is it

coming from the preacher or is it coming from the Lord is God trying to do something is God trying to challenge or disrupt something is God giving me a nudge that I need to listen to and number three as often as you can receive preaching in the context of worship in a local church now why does that matter there's nothing wrong with listening to sermons online I listen to tons of sermons online all the time I have a steady diet of content that I'm constantly consuming and I think it's great but there's no substitute for a steady diet of preaching in a local church worship gathering number one because good preaching is going to be contextualized to that specific audience right scripture is going to apply to one congregation in ways that it might not apply to another congregation so all good faithful preaching is contextualized to you if you're a part of that community number two because the sermon is one part of a greater whole and we see that when we look at the flow of the liturgy it's not just a few songs and a sermon and that's intentional the sermon is meant to stir up things in us that we then have an opportunity as we move forward in the community to confess and we confess that to the

Lord silently or aloud and then we hear God's grace and pardon spoken into our lives a reaffirmation that the gospel that was preached in the sermon God willing is true for us right and then all of that readies us to come and receive Christ in the bread and wine as we received him through the preaching of the word the the climax of the service is not the sermon the sermon is meant to prepare us on our journey to the table so as often as you can experience preaching in the context of Eucharistic worship it's part of a greater whole so I'm going to bring all this to a close at Advent we are deeply committed to biblical expository preaching and teaching and that is only going to be more true in the years to come we are also committed to this being a place where people are welcomed and where they are encouraged but also where they are challenged to grow in their faith if you went to a physical trainer and you said

I'm eating junk food and I never exercise and they said great job keep it up or if you went to a doctor and you said I've got blood coming out of multiple places in my body and discoloration and I'm losing consciousness periodically and they said well you sound like the picture of health to me right that's malpractice it's not going to be that kind of church you're going to be challenged you might be offended because our ultimate aim is to see you grow in let's pray Lord we thank you and praise you and even as we say the purpose of this we pray that the purpose of this would be true that we would now be further prepared to pray to you to confess our sin to you and to come and receive you through the bread and wine Lord we pray that your sacrifice for us that set us free and gave us new life we pray that new life would be something we taste and experience here and now

[37:53] Lord as we continue our worship and we pray this in Jesus holy name amen