

Will Willimon  
A Sermon for Every Sunday  
Easter 3A  
Acts 2:14a, 36-41

And now, we are going to engage in a daring activity. I'm going to try to speak for the risen Christ. And you are going to try to listen for a word from Christ in my sermon. Preaching is a chief way that Christians are encountered by God's word.

Some of you think that talk of our sermons as "God's word" flatters us preachers. How little you know!

I know, from my years of preaching and watching listener response to my preaching, that I'm not in control of the communication between you and the Lord. In even my sermons, God may speak, you may hear and then, our lives are made more complicated.

That dynamic of speaking and hearing, and its risks, is illustrated by this morning's scripture from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter two, Peter's sermon. When the smoke settles at Pentecost, with Jews "from every nation under heaven" (2:5) talking funny and hearing funny, the mocking mob in the street sneers, "It's as if Jesus is still with them; they're drunk."

Peter goes out into the street and courageously faces down the mob: We're not drunk! Yet. It's only nine in the morning.

*Peter?* Remember where we left Peter? When they were safe at the table, Peter boldly declared, "Lord, I'll speak up for you. Count on me" (Luke 22:33, paraphrased).

A powerless serving maid shut him up: "Weren't you with the Galilean?"

Peter mumbled, "I never really knew him."

Now, in Luke's Acts of the Apostles, *Peter* preaches. You don't believe that the same Spirit who led Jesus to speak in Nazareth has descended on Jesus's betrayers and deniers? Then how do you explain that *Peter* preaches?

"This Jesus God raised up. We are all witnesses to that fact. He was exalted to God's right side and received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit. He poured out this Spirit, and you are hearing and seeing the results. . . . Therefore, let all Israel know beyond question that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." (Acts 2:32-33, 36)

This is one of history's worst sermons. Short, ridiculously so. No illustrations, culturally insensitive, accusatory, without intellectual foundation, no connections, no bridge from there to here.

Then comes maybe the most miraculous moment on the day of Pentecost. “When the crowd heard this, they were deeply troubled. They said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what should we do?’ Peter replied, “Change your hearts and lives. Each of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is for you, your children, and for all who are far away—as many as the Lord our God invites.”

I have no explanation for why, with this short, poorly illustrated sermon Peter’s sermon transformed a mocking mob into the first mass baptism in church history. The crowd could have responded, “You have your nerve telling us that we are responsible for Jesus’ death.” “Who are you to tell us that we should repent?” “Where did you get your theological credentials that authorize you to interpret scripture to us?”

No, their response was heartfelt and genuine. They were “deeply troubled.” They asked with one voice, “What should we do?” What can we do actively to respond to your sermon? No preacher could ask for more.

“Those who accepted Peter’s message were baptized. God brought about three thousand people into the community on that day.” Wow. Three thousand!

It’s a fulfillment of God’s promise through the prophet Isaiah: *So is my word that comes from my mouth; it does not return to me empty. Instead, it does what I want, and accomplishes what I intend.* (Isa 55:11)

On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended. People began to hear and talk in unexpected, unusual ways. This Sunday we celebrate a double miracle. Miracle One, Peter (of all people) preached. He did a simple, short, straightforward account of the facts of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Miracle Two, that sermon reaped the most spectacular harvest of any sermon in the New Testament. What happened that day was not wrought by Peter, nor was it a sign of the crowd’s perceptive spirituality. It was a miracle, that is, sign of intervention by the Holy Spirit.

It’s not a sermon until God takes my words and makes them God’s word. And the amazing thing is, *God does*. We’re talking about a double miracle of speaking and hearing. Only God can speak of God and, in sermons, even mine, God speaks to listeners, even listeners like you.

That’s one of the reasons why you are here in this service. You are listening for God. But you know that you are a bundle of biases, prejudices, preconceptions and objections that can block communication between you and God. But here’s some good news: In the power of the Holy Spirit, God will enable you to hear.

I’ll let you in on a secret: The best, most frightening thing about being a preacher isn’t having to stand and deliver to a conglomeration of ill-formed listeners. No, the best, most frightening thing is when God takes our words and makes them God’s.

We preachers talk a good game: “They don’t hear!” Amen. “They don’t listen!” How true. I’m up there giving a hundred and fifty percent and the ushers are taking them out on stretchers.

And yet . . . I meant to get around to the sermon before Saturday, but it was one thing and then another. So I jot down some inanities on the back of an envelope. I stand up on Sunday, pull out some sappy illustrations, “tie a yellow ribbon on the old oak tree,” “he ain’t heavy, he’s my brother”—praying it’s the first sermon they’ve heard. Stand for the benediction. I’m done. He greets me at the door, fighting back tears, and he grips my hand, saying, “Good sermon. God really spoke to me. I’m going to quit my job, sell the pickup, learn Spanish and nursing, and move to Honduras as a missionary.”

And what is it a preacher feels when your words become God’s?

“Look, uneducated, unsophisticated, poorly defended layperson—I *was just preaching!* You’re not supposed to take this literally. We’re not fundamentalists! That was a metaphor!”

Here’s truth that is both encouragement and warning: Because of the God we’ve got, we can’t trust preaching to be ineffective.

Peter preaches post-Pentecost a poorly prepared, badly delivered sermon, and thousands respond, “What should we do?” God made the worst sermon the most effective ever preached.

It’s enough to keep a preacher nervous.

What many preachers lack is a sufficiently robust theology to account for why sometimes, despite our worst sermons, God speaks. *They hear.* A preacher is plagued by questions: Do I really want that much power over a person’s life? What if what a person hears from my sermon complicates or makes that person’s life more difficult, even dangerous?

But those are preacher thoughts. Let me give you some listeners some good news that’s related to this account of Peter’s sermon in Acts 2: Listener response doesn’t place a boundary around what God says to God’s people through God’s preachers. If you are a sermon listener (and aren’t we all?) who is exasperated by an inability to make sense of sermons, be of good cheer! Your auditory limitations don’t stump God. Hearing a sermon is not an exclusively human work. It’s a miracle.

That’s why I’ve got lots of explanations for why people don’t hear, few reasons— none of them non-miraculous—for why they do. You can listen with the expectation that you’ll be given the gift of hearing. In spite of all the reasons why listeners may not hear a sermon, we may listen with confidence that a relentlessly revealing God is determined to be heard.

There you are, listening. You think you are sitting through a sermon because you want to, fancying yourself to be in control of the communication, blithely supposing that you can filter, unplug, hit delete anytime you like. No, if you can decide what God can say to you that god can never save you.

*Yet we do hear.* What a comfort to know that our relationship with God is not in our hands, not just another laborious assignment. It’s up to God to keep the God/human conversation going and every time you hear something in a sermon you know, God does.

“I had my people pegged as a conglomeration of self-interested, materialistic consumers but then Jesus came along and made them into a church with a heart for mission,” said a preacher, with a smile. Surprise. Their lives, their engagement in mission show that they have heard.

Pray that I’ll keep risking sermons and that you’ll keep risking listening to the God who is determined to connect with you so that you may better connect with God. Amen.

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