

“From Crisis to Crisis”

Luke 10:8-11, Romans 10:14-17

First Presbyterian Church

September 5, 2021

Have you ever heard a preacher preach on preaching?

Sounds really exciting, eh?

Well, Heather and I certainly think so.

And actually, I hope you will too

as this Labor Day Sunday

we reflect on the work that at least two of us do,

but which all of us are involved in as a part of worship.

Luke 10:8-11

Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into the streets and say “Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.”

Romans 10:14-17

¹⁴But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? ¹⁵And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” ¹⁶But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?” ¹⁷So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

Sermon

Each fall, at the start of the new semester, a preaching professor gave his beginning preaching students an assignment. “Go the library,” he said, “and starting with the late nineteenth century survey English and American books about preaching for any common themes that emerge.”

And then, before they took off for the stacks, he gave them this hint: “All you’ll really need to do is look at the introduction of each book.” And sure enough... the students noticed a pattern.

A significant number of preaching books written in the past 150 years began with some variation on this sentence: *“Preaching today is facing a crisis.”*

Preaching today is facing a crisis.¹ In OUR day, this crisis is being caused by at least two major changes. First, (and I have mentioned this before) the days of churches being “Sunday-centric” and “building centric” are fast coming to a close. No longer can we assume that everybody’s going to show up Sunday after Sunday for worship and Bible study. Which means that no longer can Sunday be the ONLY time the church is really open for business. Whether we like it or not, we now live in an “on-demand” world... and just like you can shop at 3 am on a Thursday if you want to, you expect to be able to join a worship service or hear a meditation or offer a prayer request at 3 am on a Thursday. In a similar way... as the pandemic has taught us that at least some folks no longer have to go into an office to do their job, we are learning that no longer is the church building the ONLY place where we can worship or learn or enjoy fellowship with one another. And though I believe that congregations will continue to gather in a central location like this, the reality is that fewer and fewer people feel the need to come to a church building to meet God – this is particularly true of young people.

So, what does it mean for preaching that we are becoming less Sunday-centric and less church building-centric? I don’t know exactly. What I do know is that this new reality offers preachers many new opportunities... and many new challenges. Preaching today is facing a crisis.

The second major change that is challenging the church in OUR day is the fact that we now live in a TGIF world.² What’s that? you ask... well, it’s a world dominated by Twitter, Google, Instagram, and Facebook... I suppose the “T” could also stand for Tiktok. Let’s be honest, many of us spend an awful lot of time each day on our screens... and we’re constantly being pulled in every direction by tweets, texts, snaps, memes, searches, games, and videos. This reality... again, whether we like it or not... has had a profound impact on the way we communicate. You see, in the old analog world (the world many of us grew up in) communication was word based. But our digital world (the world we live in NOW) is image driven.

¹ John Addison Dally in an excerpt from his book *Choosing the Kingdom – Missional Preaching for the Household of God*, Alban Institute, 2008 (<http://www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?q=printme&id=5632>)

² Tim Lucas and Warren Bird, *Liquid Church-6 Powerful Currents to Saturate Your City for Christ* (Zondervan,2019), p. 97.

The first instinct of teens and young adults is to communicate not through words, but through pictures and emojis, videos and social media. My instinct – as is evidenced by all these papers with carefully thought-out words written on them – is not that. And one of the most beautiful things – and definitely one of the most challenging things about being the church NOW is that some of us are native to the analog, word-based world... and some of us are native to the digital, image-driven world... and MANY of us stand with one foot in both worlds. What does this mean for preaching? I don't know, exactly... other than this new reality offers preachers many new opportunities and many new challenges. Preaching today is facing a crisis.

Now, these changes in our culture and religious practice ARE VERY SIGNIFICANT, but they are NOT NEW. The fact that Sunday is no longer set aside by society for worship and family and rest is not new... the fact that worship and Sunday school attendance is down, even among our most devoted of members, is not new... the fact that technology has drastically changed how we connect... how we get our information... even how our brains work... is not new. The thing is the pandemic has greatly accelerated all these changes that were already happening. COVID has simply accelerated the pace of the changes that have been happening for decades... creating what feels like a crisis for the church (and so many other organizations) – But definitely creating what feels like a crisis for the church – including the church's preaching ministry. So yes... preaching today is facing a crisis... but it's not the kind of crisis we have been exploring thus far. It's another kind of crisis – it's the kind of crisis that gives preaching its very meaning and purpose. Here's what I mean. Allow me to be a "Bible geek" for a moment and tell you that the Greek word "krisis" is used forty-seven times in the New Testament... which is A LOT, by the way! Yet, the interesting thing is that "krisis" in the New Testament almost never means what we mean by crisis.³ For us a crisis is almost always bad... we have health crisis or an economic crisis or an environmental crisis... and it's something bad... it's something we have to fix... and fast! But in the New Testament, "krisis" refers NOT to a problem to be fixed... it refers to what God has done in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

³ Dally again.

You see, the central message of the New Testament is that, in Jesus, God entered history in a unique way... that in Jesus, God literally broke into human history offering a radical alternative to human notions of power and success and destiny... and that God's coming into our world in Jesus created a crisis which demands a response. As Jesus proclaimed in his most-preached sermon... in him the kingdom of God (the kingdom of heaven) has come near... creating a crisis that is not a bad thing we have to fix... but does demand our response... does force us to choose who we will serve. For some New Testament authors, this *krisis* happened when folks met Jesus in person – face-to-face. They heard him preach or teach... they were healed by his power or just loved by his love and as a result, they were given a choice... they were presented with a decision about how they would live the rest of their lives. For others this “krisis” happens when we meet him even now... and we DO MEET HIM even now, don't we? And when we do, we must decide. The core message of the gospel is that in the “fullness of time” God intervened in human history in a unique way... that something happened in this particular life, death and resurrection that altered the structure of reality, that divided all time into “then” and “now”... and that those who encounter this Jesus find themselves in “krisis”... with a choice... a decision to be made... as to who they will serve... who will have their allegiance. Fred Craddock, who was arguably one of the greatest preachers of our day, said that once upon a time the most frequent complaint about preaching was that it was not “biblical” enough. Today, he says, the most frequent complaint is that too much preaching sounds as if “nothing is at stake” ... as if nothing really matters. Fred Craddock knew there IS something at stake. Life is at stake.

The challenge for preachers in this time (as it has been for preachers in every time) is how to proclaim this urgent “krisis” in a way that it can be seen and heard and experienced anew. In the Gospel of John, we read about some Greek Jews who came to Jerusalem for the Passover - and having heard SO MUCH about the Lord, they approached Philip and said, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.” Sir, we would like to see Jesus.

Well, I'm not quite sure how the tradition started, but over the centuries since, those very words have been carved into pulpits all over the world... so that whoever dares enter... whoever dares offer a word from the Lord... will be reminded just WHO and WHAT this preaching is about.

“Sir, we would see Jesus.”

Which means that preaching is not about helpful hints for a lasting marriage or happy family... although we want marriages to last and families to be happy. A sermon is not a well-written essay on a religious topic... or a touching story with a theological point... although good sermons are well-written and good stories are quite powerful. And preaching is certainly not about filling the pews and making the budget and keeping people satisfied, although those things sure make it easier to be a pastor. No, preaching is an urgent, potentially life-changing event – an announcement that the Word became flesh and lived among us... that the kingdom of heaven has come near. And THAT announcement creates for us all (preacher included!) the “krisis” of God breaking into our world... into OUR lives... and calling us to respond with faith and allegiance. Paul Tillich once said, “We have to . . . overcome the wrong stumbling block in order to bring people face to face with the right stumbling block... and enable them to make a genuine decision for the Gospel.”⁴

The right stumbling block, my friends, is Jesus... and the kingdom which he brings. It is a reality that is already here (as he told his disciples the very first time, he sent them out to preach – Tell them, he says, that the kingdom of God has come near to you.” But his kingdom is not fully here. And until it IS fully here, we need preaching that points us all to Jesus... preaching that lay in front of us the right stumbling block... preaching that, even now, calls everyone who will listen to a krisis that leads to life.

⁴ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 213.