

“Preach the Word”
2 Timothy 4:1-5 (NRSV)

Why do you think most **preachers preach**? Is it because they have a weekly captive audience and like to sound important? Is it because preaching is still a very quaint, although admittedly outmoded, custom? Is it because preachers probably have nothing else to keep themselves occupied? Actually, it is none of the above. Preachers preach for the same reasons people tend to show up for worship: “to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind [upon] the truth of God, to purge [and to inspire] the imagination with the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, and to devote the will to the purposes of God” (**William Temple**).

Our text for today is **a charge to preachers**. It’s often used at ordination or induction services. Paul’s focus, of course, was upon his rather shy, sometimes reticent, young protégé, Timothy. The heat of the apostle’s fire was intensified by the burning realization he was a dying man: “As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come” (4:6). I must admit that after 36 years of being a pastor and preacher and, knowing that I, too, am in the home stretch, this text has added poignancy. The charge that follows in verses 1-5 initiates some of the final thoughts of what is essentially the old apostle’s last will and testament.

1. The solemnity of the charge (2 Tim. 4:1).

Paul’s words resound with powerful passion: “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you ...” (4:1). Preaching or proclaiming God’s message is **no slight matter**. It all has to do with God. As someone has said, “If preaching isn’t about God it isn’t very effective.”

Paul invokes here what is, in fact, an eternal, unchangeable reality – no matter what we find ourselves doing – there is always **the ever-present reality of God the Father and of his risen Son, Jesus Christ**. God in Christ was and is and will always be present when we do something like preaching. God in Christ saw Paul write these words to Timothy. God in Christ saw Timothy read them for the first time. God in Christ saw Timothy’s heart. And God in Christ sees us and knows us, no matter what our work or profession, as we hear these words repeated today.

This solemn charge was electrified by **three realities** about Christ Jesus, which Timothy needed to see in all their voltage. Paul makes it clear it is **Jesus Christ** (not God the Father) **“who is to judge the living and the dead.”** Early on in his ministry Jesus himself warned his detractors, “The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, so that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father” (Jn. 5:22-23a). All judgment is committed to Christ Jesus. Now this is, firstly, **good news** because it is clear Jesus has identified with us and suffered for us, and even died for us, so it is likely we can expect a sympathetic hearing (Heb. 4,14-16). Jesus knows us and we know him (Jn. 10:14). This awesome Son of God who came in the flesh as the Son of Man will be the judge of Timothy’s and our service. This was meant to energize Timothy – to add some voltage to Paul’s charge.

But it was also, secondly, **meant to electrify him** to heightened attention and devotion. **John Calvin**, the great commentator of Scripture, said of this passage, “[Paul] makes special mention of the judgment of Christ because he will require of us, who are his representatives, a stricter account of our failures in his ministry” (David W. Torrance & Thomas F. Torrance, eds., Vol. 10, 1964, p. 32). This echoes the apostle **James’** caution, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes ...” (Jas. 3:1-2a). The realization we will all be judged by the Servant of all servants is jolting. This isn’t a negative thing for the faithful, careful servant, but it can be a source of added electricity.

Then there is the approaching reality of **Jesus Christ’s brilliant “appearing,”** the epiphany of his second coming, which Scripture describes as “the rising of the sun” (Mal. 4:2a), and which Paul calls in the third of his Pastoral Letters, “the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:13-14 NIV). Jesus’ “appearing” awaits Timothy, and all who, like him, serve our Lord. What an electrically charged day that will be!

This dazzling reality will be followed by **Jesus Christ’s “kingdom”** -- when “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever” (Rev. 11:15b). Timothy and those who follow after him will rule with Christ forever and ever.

Paul's charge – so solemn in the presence of God and of Jesus Christ, so jolting, so charged, certainly so activated in Timothy's soul, as it must be in ours as well – reminds us that Jesus Christ is present with us, watching over us, and his judgment and appearing and kingdom will surely come.

2. **The basics of the charge** (2 Tim. 4:2).

The charge itself is contained in a single statement, made up of five terse imperatives: **“proclaim the message; be persistent**, whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; **convince, rebuke and encourage**, with the utmost patience in teaching ...” (4:2). The abruptness of each of these commands is meant to convey urgency – terminal urgency. Timothy must waste no time. He must get to it.

It's clear some of these commands are directed at **Timothy's reticence**, at the things he didn't naturally like to do. In truth, no preacher likes to do certain of these things, especially if she or he is the least bit shy or bashful. But Paul is insistent. Get out there! Get going!

Would you believe **I wasn't always the most outspoken of people**? Well, it's true. Though I first sensed a call into ministry at the relatively early age of 14, I remained rather sensitive and shy well into young adulthood. I volunteered to be a leader in my church youth group, but I would sometimes stumble if called upon to make announcements. Certain subjects raised by my minister in his sermons, too, would cause me to blush from the top of my head to the bottom of my toes. Whenever I was asked to preside at a meeting or a service I'd usually script every remark. I still write out most of my sermons. Today most people probably think I preach because I am a “natural.” Little do you know. Understand, those of you who are called to preach, that it is **not a matter of preference or even our natural giftedness** as we understand it. It is simply a matter of obedience. If God has called you to preach, that must be the signature of your life and soul.

Paul **first** demands that Timothy should **“proclaim the message”** or **“preach the Word”** (4:2a, NIV). By placing this command first, and then enlarging upon it in the following imperatives, Paul makes it **the signature of Christian ministry**. This is surely not lost on the people of the Reformed and the Presbyterian faith. Preaching is a large part of what pastors and preachers are called to do. Preaching is at the center of our services of worship. Preaching explains and delivers the Word of God.

It's a matter of historical fact that our church's namesake, **John Calvin**'s own inclinations were to closet himself and give his great mind to private, humanistic studies. And early on, that is what he decided to do. However, when he visited the city of Geneva, **William Farel**, the fiery leader of the Reformed church in that city discovered he was there and sought him out. It was a meeting that changed the course of history. Calvin relates what happened in his preface to his commentary on the Psalms:

Farel who burned with extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel, ... learned my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies, for which I wished to keep myself free from other pursuits, and finding that he gained nothing by entreaties, he proceeded to utter an imprecation that God would curse my retirement, and the tranquility of the studies I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to give assistance, when the necessity was so urgent. By this imprecation I was so stricken with terror that I desisted from the journey I had undertaken.

Calvin's biographer, **John Dillenberger**, writes of this encounter:

The course of his life was irrevocably changed. Not just geographically, but vocationally. Never again would Calvin work in what he called the "tranquility of studies." From now on every page of the [more than fifty] volumes of books and tracts and sermons and commentaries and letters that he wrote would be hammered out on the anvil of pastoral responsibility.

It is precisely because Calvin, despite his inclinations, gave himself to the public proclamation and ministry of the Word that his writings have such pungency and practicality. He did it all in Geneva! He spoke to the people's needs. He preached the Word -- following passage after passage, out of the New Testament on Sunday mornings, out of the Psalms on Sunday afternoons, and out of most of the books of the Old Testament during the other days of the week. He preached the Word as often as he could, whether it was received or rejected -- correcting, rebuking, encouraging with patience and careful instruction.

And here we must not gloss over the obvious, as so many preachers do today. It is the Word that is to be preached! Not as a springboard for one's own ideas, but in all its fullness and power.

As the eminent theologian and patristic scholar, **Thomas Oden** says:

There is not a hint here that preaching is primarily thought of as self-expression of subjective experience or feeling disclosure or autobiography or “telling one’s story” so as to neglect Scripture.... The whole counsel of God is to be preached, without fanciful, idiosyncratic amendment or individualistic addition (1989, p. 135).

“Tell me the stories of Jesus.” The Word will do the work.

The **second** imperative expands the thought: **“be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable”** or **“be prepared in season and out of season”** (4:2b NIV). Now some, quoting Scripture, may say, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven ...” (Eccles. 3:1). But that is not what is meant here. **One must preach the Word whether it is convenient or inconvenient.** Preaching is not only reserved to when you feel like it, or when you are psychologically ready, or when the time seems good. My own experience is that very often when I least feel like preaching or I don’t feel all that good about my preaching that those are the times God uses. Frankly, there have been times when I mounted the pulpit thinking I had a “silver bullet” -- only to discover I had a rubber bullet that fell harmlessly into the center aisle – ignominiously impotent. The call here is for radical availability. John Calvin came to understand for himself that it sometimes even called for **“aggressiveness”** in overcoming hindrances and even a **“ruthless persistence”** (Vol. 10, p. 333) – in season and out of season.

Two days before the death of **Clarence Edward Macartney**, a great American Presbyterian preacher and upholder of orthodoxy in the first part of the twentieth century, was visited by his brother, Robertson, who was on his way to preach at a nearby church. As Robertson left, he heard his famous brother say, **“Put all the Bible you can into it.”** It was the counsel of one who had preached to thousands, written many books, read and traveled extensively and played a prominent part in the life of the Christian church. It was good advice. Be someone who knows the Word. Study it. Learn the themes and outlines of all the books. Memorize the great passages. Immerse yourself in its narratives. Know its great souls; walk with them. Make your blood “bibline” (Spurgeon’s term). Pray its rhythms. And when you speak about the Bible or have an opportunity to preach, “Put all the Bible you can into it.” Let the Word do the work.

The last three imperatives form a neat group -- a triple ministry: **“convince** [sometimes translated as **‘correct’** NIV], **rebuke and encourage**, with the utmost patience in teaching” (4:2c). If you enjoy correcting and rebuking you are likely not fit for the ministry. But if you don’t do it when you need to you’re a shirker.

John Stott, who has so much to do with the rebirth of Biblical exposition in the English-speaking world, came to Christ as a boy through the ministry of a remarkable Church of England clergyman, **E. J. H. Nash**. Nash or **“Bash”** as he was affectionately called, was used of God to point a number of gifted people to Christ – such as Michael Green, John Pollock and a number of presidents of Cambridge Inter-Varsity. Part of Nash’s genius was that although he was **caring**, he was aggressive in his **correction** of his disciples. Stott writes, “His letters to me often contained rebuke, for I was a wayward young Christian and needed to be disciplined. In fact, so frequent were his admonitions at one period, that whenever I saw his familiar writing on an envelope, I needed to pray and prepare myself for half an hour before I felt ready to open it.” Correction may be difficult, but it is also necessary.

Let me tell you it requires no interior joy to set others straight. But most of all it requires the third imperative of this triple ministry – that one will **“encourage – with great patience and careful instruction”** (NIV). You must come alongside your people with encouraging words – “That’s right. You’re doing fine. You’re making progress. That was beautiful.” And in doing this, you’re called to exhibit patience because you will rarely see quick results to your ministry. Helpful correction and rebuke will always need to be teamed with careful and patient teaching; otherwise it will be unprofitable.

What a massive charge this is: **“proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, [correct], rebuke, and encourage with the utmost in patience”** (4:2). No one is completely capable for such a task. Therefore the call itself is an invitation to let God possess you – to live a life of profound dependence on him.

3. **The reason for this charge** (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

Why should Timothy preach the Word? It is because people naturally find some ways to move away from the truth. People are the same in every age.

“For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths” (4:3-4).

Someone has said that **the ministry is one of the hardest jobs** to fulfill. Where else, for example, do you have to convince your employers that they should really all become employees for the kingdom?

Paul’s prophecy about “itching ears” and “accumulating teachers to suit their own desires” covers the whole of Biblical history, both in retrospect and prospect. **Jeremiah** lamented, “The prophets prophesy lies ... and my people love it this way” (Jer. 5:31). God later explained to **Ezekiel**, “Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice” (Ezek. 33:32). Remember also how **Jesus** explained in the parable of the four types of soil how many ostensible believers turn out to be essentially unbelievers.

Some people always love to hear something different and sensational. So they seek teachers who will confirm their illusions. In the fourth century, **Gregory of Nazianus** also wrote concerning “itching ears” – it was no surprise to him that “When this syndrome is in place, people who call themselves Christian will find the truth in Christ Jesus intolerable and will seek to stamp it out” (Oden, p. 137). Today, certain preachers fill sports arenas by telling people what they want to hear about money or politics, by entertaining them and by proclaiming bizarre doctrines that appeal to the curiosity. Whole intellectual careers are spent on “demythologizing” the Bible and reducing the words of Jesus to a few moralizing sound bites. The masses prefer myths to truth.

But that is why **authentic preachers must preach the Word** in its historical setting and in the context of the whole Bible, making the appropriate biblical connections and discerning all the ways it is a revelation of Jesus Christ, and by applying it to today’s context in a very practical and genuine way. That is why preachers sweat in the study and in the pulpit.

4. **The necessity of this charge** (2 Tim. 4:5).

Paul sums up the necessities of this charge as he finishes his thought:

“As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully” (4:5). Ministry is a full-time job. In keeping his head, Timothy was to literally be sober and cool in all circumstances, just as a commercial pilot must be in an emergency when all the passengers are crying out with fear. Stability must characterize a preacher in an upside-down world. Enduring hardship is also a recurrent theme in the Pastoral Letters (2 Tim. 1:8; 2:3, 9; 3:12). Ministry is no cake walk. The sharing of the gospel is to be Timothy’s lifework – “do the work of an evangelist.” Preachers should know how to lead people to Jesus Christ. In fact, there is no area of ministry that is to be avoided – “carry out your ministry fully.” Paul was well aware that there are lots of other things that ministers do beside preaching.

And so it is. The years will fly by like the fence posts on the Trans-Canada Highway Number One as you drive along – years quickly become decades. You and I will change with those years. But God’s call will never change. Jesus Christ – your Judge, your Saviour, your King – will always be present, charging your call with divine voltage. And his charge will always be: “proclaim the message; be persistent [in season and out of season]; convince, [correct], rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.” “Keep your head in all situations, endure suffering; do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.”

Amen

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February 22, 2009