

# DIOCESAN LAY READER TRAINING

Preaching 3

Writing the Sermon — Structure, Clarity, and Faithful Proclamation

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# Recap

- Attention to the context – speaking to real people, in a real place, at a real moment in their lives
- Faithful preaching builds a bridge between Scripture and lived experience of people in the pews
- Preaching is NOT about you – your task is to serve your people by helping them hear God’s word in a way that gives life
- Lectionary: 4 readings, but they are not connected, not designed to form a single theme
- Choose one passage and let it speak

# Recap

- Paying attention to your congregation and context
- Choosing one text
- Listening to the text, the Spirit, and the people
- Reading and researching thoughtfully
- Allowing one clear idea to emerge

# In this Session we will...

- Consider the practical question many people are most anxious about...
  - *I know what I want to say, but how do I actually write the sermon??*

# What a sermon is...and is not

- Rhetoric
  - *Not manipulative or political*
  - *Using language carefully and intentionally to communicate a point clearly*
- Sermon is not a lecture, Bible study, or collection of interesting thoughts!
- Carefully shaped piece of spoken language designed to help people grasp ONE CENTRAL TRUTH and carry it with them in the week ahead
- \*\*TIP: Because this is rhetoric and the focus is heavily on the spoken word, read your sermon aloud as you write, so you can hear it. Hear the language, the cadence of your words, all of it. This will make your sermon a lot better. Next session I will go over how to practice for actual preaching and setting up your manuscript so you can preach it really well rhetorically.\*\*

# What a sermon is...and is not

- Goal: not to impress people with what you know, not to say everything that could be said about the passage, not to cover multiple ideas
- Your goal is: CLARITY, CLEAR COMMUNICATION

# What a sermon is...and is not

- Leading people by the hand, walking with them through the text, step by step
- If you move too quickly, jump ideas, or overload them with information, they will get lost and once they are lost, they won't come back



If someone heard this sermon once, would they know what I was trying to say?

If your answer is no...you need to tighten your sermon

# One Text. One Point. One Sermon.

- This doesn't mean it is simple, it means it is focused....depth comes from clarity not quantity.
- Ask yourself
  - *What is this text really about?*
  - *What is the good news here?*
  - *What is the one thing I hope people remember on Tuesday afternoon?*
- If you can answer these types of questions in one sentence, you are ready to write.

# Length Matters

- Aim for around 7 minutes, roughly 1000-1020 words
- Shorter Sermons
  - *Force clarity*
  - *Reduce rambling*
  - *Respect people's attention and energy*
  - *Make it more likely that people will actually remember something*

# The Basic Structure of a Sermon

- Tell people what you are going to say
  - Say it
  - Tell them what you said
- 
- You are not repeating yourself because people are slow. You are repeating yourself because *spoken language is fleeting*. People cannot re-read a sermon. They need help following along.

# The Introduction: Setting the Direction

- Ground the sermon in Scripture
- Signal what the sermon is about
- Invite people in
- Capture people's attention

This is not the place for a long personal story or commentary on your week (don't start by talking about yourself), your goal is to get people interested, engaged

- Strong openings often sound like:
  - *“In today's Gospel, Jesus tells a story about...”*
  - *“The Psalm we just heard gives voice to...”*
  - *“This passage confronts us with a difficult question...”*

# The Introduction: Setting the Direction

- You can also be creative, to capture people's attention and get them engaged
  - *Videos*
  - *Music*
  - *Pop culture references*
  - *A creative re-telling of the passage you are preaching on*

# The Body: Saying What You Need to Say

- Explain what is happening in the text
- Offer interpretation and insight
- Connect the text to the lives of your congregation
- You might add a brief personal story, but ONLY if it serves the text
  - *Does this help illuminate the Gospel, or does it shift attention to me?*

# The Conclusion: Gathering It Up

- Do not introduce new ideas in the conclusion
- Gather everything together and return to your central point
- A good conclusion often:
  - *Restates the main idea in fresh language*
  - *Names the good news clearly*
  - *Leaves people with hope*

Remember: people may forget your words,  
but they will remember how the sermon  
made them feel. Always leave them with  
something to carry.

Any Questions?

# An Example: Matthew 3:13-17 (Baptism of Jesus)

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

# An Example: Matthew 3:13-17 (Baptism of Jesus)

- The revelation of Jesus' identity is given to all people, not just to Jesus...we know this because God speaks in the third person: This is my Son the Beloved with whom I am well pleased.”
- *In this Gospel, we are never told what God sounds like, but it does seem like God is speaking to everyone present not just to Jesus. God doesn't say, “you are my son the beloved,” which God would say if speaking directly to Jesus...instead God says, “this is my son the beloved.” God is speaking to everyone gathered.*

# Introduction: Tell Them What You Are Going to Say

- “In today’s Gospel, we hear about Jesus coming to John to be baptized. At first glance, it might seem like a simple story — a man standing in line, receiving a ritual. But listen closely: when God speaks, God does not speak directly to Jesus. God speaks about him — to everyone who is gathered. ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ Today, I want us to notice that God is speaking not only to Jesus, but to everyone present. And if we pay attention, we can hear God speaking that same truth to us. We’ll explore what it means that God’s declaration of love is public, relational, and meant for the people who are watching — and how that changes the way we see Jesus and how we live our lives.”

# Body: Say it (exegesis)

In the Gospel, Jesus comes to John to be baptized, standing in line with everyone else. Nothing about this moment sets him apart visually. He is not elevated. He is not singled out. He is simply there — among the people. And then the heavens open. What is striking is not only that God speaks, but how God speaks. God does not address Jesus directly. Instead, God speaks about Jesus — to those who are watching. “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” That tells us something important about what this moment is for. This is not primarily for Jesus’ benefit. It is for the people who are gathered — the ones trying to make sense of who he is, and what God is doing. God reveals Jesus’ identity publicly, clearly, and relationally. Not with explanation. Not with instruction. But with a declaration of love. The people are not told what Jesus will do next. They are not given a roadmap for what lies ahead. They are simply told who Jesus is.

# Body: Say it (connection to lived experience)

This matters, because many of us are not standing in moments of clarity. We are standing in lines we did not choose — waiting, hoping, wondering what God is doing. We want God to speak directly to our questions: What should I do? Why did this happen? How will this turn out? But often, God does not answer those questions right away. Instead, God speaks around us — into the community, into the story we are part of — reminding us who Jesus is and where God's love is anchored. Just as the crowd at the river was not given certainty about the future, we are not always given clarity about what comes next. But we are given something else: a public, spoken assurance of who Christ is and how God regards him. And when that assurance is spoken aloud, it is meant to steady those who are listening. God's voice here is not about solving problems. It is about grounding faith. It is about giving people something solid to hold onto as the story unfolds.

# Conclusion: Tell Them What You Said

So the good news of this Gospel is not only that Jesus is named as God's beloved Son. It is that this naming is spoken for us. God speaks so that those who are gathered might know who stands among them. So that when confusion comes — and it will — they remember where God's love has been revealed. This story reminds us that faith often begins not with answers, but with recognition. Not with certainty, but with trust. God says, "This is my Son, the Beloved," and in hearing that, we are invited to follow — to watch, to listen, and to walk with Christ, even when the way ahead is not yet clear.

Any Questions?

# Rhetorical Repetition: Saying the Same Thing Faithfully

- Why repetition matters in preaching

- *Repetition is not redundancy — it is pastoral care.*
- *People listen, process, and remember differently.*
- *What one person misses, another hears clearly.*
- *Repetition allows the Gospel to settle, not just be heard once.*

# Rhetorical Repetition: Saying the Same Thing Faithfully

- What repetition actually is

- *Returning to the same core truth using different words, images, or angles.*
- *Clarifying rather than adding new ideas.*
- *Giving listeners more than one doorway into the message.*

# Rhetorical Repetition: Saying the Same Thing Faithfully

## ■ Biblical Roots

- *Scripture itself uses repetition (psalms, prophetic oracles, Jesus' parables).*
- *Jesus often teaches the same truth multiple ways: story, image, command.*
- *Repetition helps move truth from the ears to the heart.*

# Rhetorical Repetition: Saying the Same Thing Faithfully

- How to use repetition well

- *Identify the one thing you want people to remember.*
- *Say it early, return to it in the middle, and echo it near the end.*
- *Change the language, not the meaning*

# Examples of Faithful Repetition in a Sermon

- Core idea: God meets us where we are.
  - *“God meets us where we are.”*
  - *“God does not wait for us to get it right before showing up.”*
  - *“Grace finds us in the middle of ordinary life.”*
  - *“God steps into our lives, not after we are ready, but as we are.”*

# Examples of Faithful Repetition in a Sermon

- Core idea: Baptism names us as beloved.
  - *“In baptism, we are named God’s beloved.”*
  - *“Before we do anything, God claims us.”*
  - *“Our worth does not come from our achievements, but from God’s love.”*
  - *“We live from identity, not toward it.”*

# Acknowledging Sources Faithfully

- Preaching is a shared ministry. None of us preaches alone.
- Throughout the history of the Church, preachers have drawn on the wisdom of others. That's not a problem — it's a gift.
- What matters is integrity.
- Instead, acknowledge sources **briefly, naturally, and without drawing attention away from the text**. For example:
  - *“Today’s message draws on a sermon by Rev. \_\_\_\_.”*
  - *“This reflection was adapted from a homily shared by the Diocese of \_\_\_\_.”*
  - *“As I prepared this sermon, another preacher’s insight helped me see this passage anew.”*

# Acknowledging Sources Faithfully

- The focus remains on the Word of God, while also honoring the shared wisdom that helped you preach it. You are **not performing someone else's sermon**. You are proclaiming the Word through your own voice, shaped and informed by the gifts of others.

# Keeping the Focus on the Gospel

- A common temptation is to begin by talking about ourselves.
  - *Examples include:*
    - “When I first read this passage...”
    - “This week was very busy for me...”
    - “I have been preaching for 50 years.”
- Even statements meant to establish credibility can unintentionally pull attention away from the text. When we start by centering ourselves — our experiences, our expertise, or our credentials — the focus shifts from God’s Word to the preacher.

# Keeping the Focus on the Gospel

- It's important to remember: your authority to preach has already been given. By standing in the pulpit, your rector or bishop has affirmed your role. You do not need to convince the congregation of your authority; it is already present.
- Small personal touches can be helpful later in the sermon, but the opening moments should set the focus clearly on the Gospel. A helpful editing question is:  

*“Does this point to God’s Word, or does it point to me?”*
- The best sermons make the preacher nearly invisible — so that what people remember is not who spoke, but what they heard from God.

# Using AI Wisely

- We also need to talk briefly about AI tools like ChatGPT.
- Using AI to write a sermon from scratch — for example, asking it to write a sermon on Psalm 23 — is plagiarism. It's not honest to your congregation or to yourself.
- However, AI can be used faithfully as an editorial aid.
  - *The best practice is to write your sermon yourself, get it as far as you can, and then use AI to help with clarity, grammar, or identifying confusing sections.*
- AI should support your work — not replace your prayer, discernment, or relationship with your congregation.

# Using Hebrew and Greek

- While original languages can be valuable tools, they can also be easily misused.
- I would encourage caution in bringing them into a sermon, as it is very easy to oversimplify or unintentionally misrepresent a point.
  - *the sermon can shift away from the Gospel and toward sounding impressive or authoritative.*
  - *opens the door for confusion or challenge, particularly if someone in the congregation does have language training.*
- Our calling in preaching is not to prove our scholarship, but to faithfully proclaim the good news in ways that are clear, honest, and accessible.
  - *When deeper language work is helpful, it is often better handled through trusted translations and solid scholarship rather than brief word studies from the pulpit.*

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# Why Writing Matters in Preaching

- One of the most important disciplines in preaching is writing out what you are going to say — not necessarily word-for-word for delivery, but clearly, intentionally, and in full sentences at some point in the process.
- Forces us to slow down, exposes gaps in logic, unclear transitions, places where we assume too much of the listener
- Helps stay faithful to the text, corrects areas where we might accidentally shift our focus away from the text
- Method can vary, but writing remains essential, part of how we show care for the congregation and respect for the task we have been given
- Pastoral responsibility

Any Questions?

**Remember: Preaching is a discipline and an act of care. Your goal is not to impress — it is to help your congregation hear God's Word clearly, follow it, and carry it into their lives.**

# Session Recap

- Faithful preaching begins with context: Scripture, congregation, and moment
- The focus of preaching is the Gospel — not the preacher
- Choose one text and listen deeply before trying to say anything
- A sermon is spoken rhetoric, not a lecture or collection of ideas
- Aim for one text, one clear point, one sermon
- Clarity matters more than quantity — shorter sermons often serve people better

# Session Recap

- A simple structure works:
  - *Tell them what you're going to say*
  - *Say it*
  - *Tell them what you said*
- Introductions set direction; conclusions gather and give hope
- Writing the sermon is essential for clarity, faithfulness, and pastoral care
- Use sources, AI, and languages ethically, humbly, and in service of the Gospel
- Always return to the central question:
- “What is the good news in this passage for these people, right now?”

Any Questions?

Next Session: Wednesday April 8, 2026  
(How to preach)