

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Acts 2:40-42, “Prepared in Worship: Word & Sacrament”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 8/27/2017**

I’m the kind of person who looks for opportunities to use the word, “penultimate.”

Oh, look: Here we are in the penultimate week of the Prepared in Worship series.

One critique of Christian worship is that it’s basically a rally for people to applaud themselves for believing in God, but has no tangible connection to the world around. (“Oh, hurray for us for believing rightly!”)

But to the contrary, I’ve pointed out again and again in this series the ways in which our worship prepares us for life that *is* connected to the issues facing humanity in very ordinary, tangible situations.

Today we take the same approach while considering Word and Sacrament.

Word *and* sacrament? Seems like a lot of ground to cover.

And it is. Far too much ground for just one sermon in fact.

But I’m speaking of them together because they truly belong together. Scholar NT Wright says, “From the very beginning— as in Luke 24, as in Acts 2—the Word and the sacrament, the teaching and the meal, together with prayer and fellowship, go with one another, reinforce one another, and energize one another.”

Now, Acts 2 is the passage we read earlier.

Peter’s extensive sermon begins in 2:14 and runs through verse 40.

This sermon reflects on citations from the book of Joel, Psalm 16, and Psalm 110.

It is quite clearly a proclamation of God’s Word in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The response to the proclamation of God’s Word?

Verse 41 says “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”

Pretty typical Presbyterian sermon response, don’t you think? ... no?

Immediately we see the connection between word & sacrament:  
the Word is preached and the worship response  
is belief which is expressed in the sacrament of Baptism.

Reflecting on the connection of word and sacrament, NT Wright says

“we think that reality is an intellectual formula  
with which we can tie everything up.  
We think that reality lies in words, when, in fact,  
the New Testament shows that it works the other way:  
‘The Word became flesh.’”

What he’s getting at is that what the Bible’s words testify to  
is the reality of Jesus Christ who came and lived among us.  
In the same way, the Word we proclaim today  
testifies to the reality of Jesus Christ  
that we touch and taste in the Lord’s Supper.  
Word and Sacrament belong together.

In verse 42 we learn that this group of fledgling believers  
devoted themselves to a number of things:  
First, the Apostles’ teaching (which depended heavily on the Hebrew Scriptures  
while applying them to Jesus Christ).  
Secondly, to fellowship (that is gathering together to share in life as believers),  
Third, to the breaking of bread (yes, eating together, but more substantially  
breaking bread is the key symbol of the Lord’s Supper  
which Jesus instructed the apostles to do in remembrance of him),  
Fourth, and to prayer.

So consider this: these newly baptized people devoted themselves to  
biblically based teaching, gathering together regularly,  
celebrating the Lord’s Supper, and praying together.

Sound familiar? These practices that we find so commonplace in church life today  
are truly powerful and extend back nearly two thousand years.  
We don’t continue these practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century by accident.

Today, we’re going to take some time to think more deeply about the practices  
of reading and reflecting on God’s Word  
and sharing in the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

As I mentioned earlier, Peter was proclaiming God's word in Acts 2.

The summary of Peter's message?

***“Save yourselves from this corrupt generation!”***

Peter clearly intends for this message from the scriptures to be believed and acted upon with a result of being moved to safety in relationship with God.

The Bible is the God-inspired story of God's involvement with creation and the sin predicament introduced by human beings. If that's true, then encountering such a Word in worship will often be unsettling even as it is also rooted in assurance of God's goodness, grace, and love.

The vitality of our worship and the empowerment of our mission both rest on our belief that God's word is good news for us.

The Bible is a Word that calls its hearers to belief.

This is a word which is to be believed *and* which is primarily about Jesus.

We might say that the written word of God reveals the living Word of God.

The whole Bible is the story of God.

It tells of one God who made all there is,

who called a people to be set apart (but who fell into rebellion),

and of how this God prepared this people (called Israel)

for the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah,

who set all things right in his death and resurrection.

In Jesus we have God on full display,

and Jesus says that the whole Bible points us to an understanding

of what God has done in Jesus Christ. This is very good news.

When we read God's written word expecting to encounter the Living Word, a new space is created which we are invited to enter.

Do you read the Bible with that awareness?

You might say that in worship, we enter into the Spirit inspired text of Scripture.

Having entered into the text, we then find a new way of looking at the world around us.

This is why faithful sermons are not merely a pat on the back  
for good Christian boys and girls, and neither are they  
merely scolding and telling people to be better.

The sermon in worship should never leave us disconnected  
from the world around us, but rather enable us to connect  
more deeply than ever to the truth of who we are and where we are  
in the world from God's perspective.

Now we move from Word to Sacrament.

In the Presbyterian church we celebrate two sacraments:  
Baptism and the Lord's Supper (or Communion).

Baptism is a physical sign of God's cleansing, renewal, and new life.  
It's an extension of God's promise of salvation  
to the person who is baptized.  
It's an outward sign of an inner grace.

In the Lord's Supper, or communion,  
Jesus shows us how to take this baptismal concept of where we find life,  
wrestle it from the world of theory, and put it into practice.  
It, too, is an outward sign of an inner grace.

How do these practices function in our preparation for life?

...

A little known fact about me is that I played trombone  
from 5<sup>th</sup> grade until I graduated from High School.  
Now I haven't kept it up because upon graduation  
I realized the trombone just isn't a great campfire instrument.  
Nobody comes over and says, "Hey you play the trombone?  
I'll bring my flugelhorn over sometime and we'll jam."  
That doesn't happen.  
But when I played, I played for one reason:  
I wanted to be in jazz band.

For me, jazz was the pinnacle of music in high school.

The reason I endured all the lame medley arrangements of songs  
from the Little Mermaid,  
the reason I pretended to care about the theme from Swan lake,  
the reason I played the four repeating base notes  
from Pomp and Circumstance  
hundreds and hundreds of times  
every year for graduation...  
was so that I could play jazz.

Jazz was the pinnacle of music in high school.  
And everyone knows that the pinnacle of jazz...is improvisation.

Once I made the jazz band, I finally got to try my hand at improvisation.  
But I quickly learned that translating  
what I heard in my head to the sound  
coming out of my instrument was pretty hard.

In fact, I was really bad at it.  
And the reason I was really bad was that I hated...to practice.  
I did it, sometimes.  
But I hated it, and because I hated to practice,  
I never really mastered my scales,  
they were always a bit of a reach for me.

The key to improvising is having your scales down.  
If you have practiced your scales,  
then the melody you want to play just naturally flows  
from your heart through your instrument.  
When you hear a player do that live, it's absolutely captivating.

What scales are to improvisation, the Sacraments are to the life of faith.  
Baptism marks the beginning of the life of faith,  
while the Lord's Supper reminds us of our Baptism  
and nourishes us for the journey.

Fortunately, it's a lot less onerous to celebrate  
the Lord's Supper than it is to practice your scales.

If we want to improvise as we follow Jesus,  
if we want to respond to the challenges of life the way he did,  
then we must adopt this practice of meeting our Lord at his table.

When we partake of this meal,  
we shape our hearts and minds around the story of Jesus,  
we shape our community around the story of Jesus,  
so that our lives will effortlessly look and sound like Jesus.  
That's what spiritual disciplines do,  
and the Lord's Supper is at the center of the discipline of worship.

Jesus spoke in this way and instituted this practice in his people  
because the way in which we encounter  
and are sustained by Jesus of Nazareth  
when we enter into this practice  
is essential for our life as God's people.

It's my belief that the more we enter into this practice  
and come to Jesus' table in faith,  
the more we are drawn into its meaning,  
the more deeply we are called to be the people of God,  
and the more deeply we are *enabled*  
to be the people of God.

If Word and Sacrament seem like small things  
when considering the vast issues that we face both personally and socially,  
then consider also the story of Javan Payeng,  
as told by Stephen Messenger.

"A little more than 30 years ago, a teenager named Jadav "Molai" Payeng  
began burying seeds along a barren sandbar near his birthplace  
in northern India's Assam region to grow a refuge for wildlife.

Back in 1979, floods washed a large number of snakes ashore on the sandbar.  
One day, after the waters had receded, Payeng, only 16 then,  
found the place dotted with the dead reptiles.  
That was the turning point of his life.

"The snakes died in the heat, without any tree cover.  
I sat down and wept over their lifeless forms. It was carnage.  
I alerted the forest department and asked them if they could  
grow trees there. They said nothing would grow there.  
Instead, they asked me to try growing bamboo. It was painful, but I did it.  
There was nobody to help me. Nobody was interested," says Payeng,  
now 47.

While it's taken years for Payeng's remarkable dedication to planting  
to receive some well-deserved recognition internationally,  
it didn't take long for wildlife in the region to benefit  
from the manufactured forest.

Demonstrating a keen understanding of ecological balance,  
Payeng even transplanted ants to his burgeoning ecosystem  
to bolster its natural harmony.

Incredibly, the spot today hosts a sprawling 1,360 acres of jungle  
that Payeng planted — single-handedly.”

<https://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/wilderness-resources/stories/indian-man-single-handedly-plants-a-1360-acre-forest>

His forest is bigger than New York City's Central Park.

When facing our problems and the problems of the world,  
you may feel like one person facing impossible odds.

But every time we read and proclaim God's word,  
every time we baptize infants or adults,  
every time we take in the body and blood of Christ,  
God is with us, the Kingdom of God is at hand,  
and a tree is planted in that desert.

These acts of worship join us in a flourishing ecosystem of hope, generosity,  
grace, and love that extends across the ages,  
and they prepare us for dynamic, Christ-like improvisation  
in our own day.