

Often the Clouds of Deepest Woe

Caroline Fry (1787–1846)

Often the clouds of deepest woe
 So sweet a message bear,
 Dark though they seem, 'twere hard to find
 A frown of anger there.

It needs our hearts be wean'd from earth,
 It needs that we be driven,
 By less of every earthly stay,
 To seek our joys in heaven.

For we must follow in the path
 Our Lord and Savior run;
 We must not find a resting-place
 Where He we love had none.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Pulpit Work in Times of Peace and Calamity

Jeff Straub

The ministry of the Word is the primary duty of the pastor. Both Paul's exhortation to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4 and his personal example (e.g. Acts 17:23) make that abundantly clear. Preaching the Word is a high and holy calling. Ministers have often talked about standing behind the "sacred desk." The desk itself is not sacred but the duty performed there is. To preach from the Word and speak on behalf of God is a duty not to be discharged lightly. Preaching the Bible week in and week out is a heavy and holy calling as one guides the Lord's people toward their heavenly rest. In this week's *Nick*, I wish to speak to the ministry of the Word, especially at times of great calamity.

I have long been a believer in expository preaching—opening the Scripture and laying out its divine meaning before a congregation. Included is systematic preaching through the Bible, generally one book at a time. Not that we should start in Genesis and preach through to the book of the Revelation without interruption. We could do that, but I wonder if that's the best way to do the work. Expository preaching is where the ministry of the Word begins—with a commitment to faithfully *expound* the Scriptures so that they will do the work which God intends them to do: "so then faith comes by hearing and hearing *by the Word of God*" (Rom 10:17).

So, given a commitment to expositional preaching, what's next? Where do we begin this sacred task? In part, the answer to the question depends on several things. Where am I in my ministry? Am I just starting out? Am I a seasoned preacher with some experience? I would still like to think I have a few good years of preaching left. I'm not sure tackling Isaiah verse by verse is what a novice minister should do. Another question to ask is, where am I at in this (my current church) ministry? What does the church really need? I think preaching should aim at something. If we aim at nothing in our preaching, we will hit it every time! Our preaching should be aimed at producing something in the hearts of our hearers—conviction, encouragement, instruction, admonition, something!

As a minister who does not fill a regular pulpit, my preaching doesn't follow a traditional approach of preaching through books of the Bible. I am called upon to fill area church pulpits for a week or two, generally when the settled pastor is away from his pulpit. Occasionally, I get to do a conference where I preach a



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series of messages of a specified topic, e.g. missions. My preaching is occasional and limited.

However, for more than half my ministry, things were different. On four separate occasions throughout my forty years of ministry, I had the joy of preaching in an assembly as its pastor or interim. Preaching week by week to the same people over an extended period of time is a great joy. Systematic teaching is possible and should be carefully thought through. Starting out in a ministry one might ask where one goes with the Word in the new situation, especially as your familiarity with the congregation is limited. For my part, I preached two different books in the early days of my pastoral ministries. First, I focused on the Gospel of John. What a great book to do evangelistic preaching! I had no idea where individuals in the assembly stood with regard to their understanding of the gospel. Preaching systematically through John allowed for regular gospel preaching designed to exhort the unbeliever to find mercy in Jesus Christ and instruction to the saints on the nature of true Christianity. I love John's Gospel for that reason. Also, I preached through the book of Philippians. The epistle is a good basic New Testament book that allows the minister to deal with the Christian's sanctification (work out your own salvation, Php 2:12), the threats of doctrinal error (beware of dogs, Php 3:2), and interpersonal challenges within the assembly (Euodia and Syntyche, Php 4:2). It is full of encouraging instruction.

The routine of preaching two to three times per week needs thoughtful attention to content (what does the assembly need?) and variety (how can we address a broad spectrum of life issues: marriage, sound theology, personal evangelism, global missions, effective parenting, conquering besetting sin, depression, etc.?). A preacher will settle into a routine of preaching that may become *too* routine. The next sermon is invariably the next pericope. This may work well on most occasions; however, there may be occasions when something interrupts the routine.

Calamity is just such an occasion. Life happens. When it does, the minister may need to deviate from the planned series to address some compelling life issue. It was my regular practice to address the things that were on the minds of my congregation at times of special challenge. I was doing doctoral work when 9/11 happened so I didn't get the opportunity to address that from the pulpit, but I would have had I been preaching then. When the tsunami of 2004 happened, I was to preach in a church in Washington state. I chose as my topic for that occasion "Spiritual Lessons from Sudden Destruction." Some estimates suggest that upwards of 225,000 people lost their lives in Indonesia and thirteen other countries. *It was just not possible not to address that global calamity.* In the same way, the recent fears of a global pandemic have also directed my pulpit work. With the world's attention turned toward an expanding health crisis, how could this not affect my preaching? Earlier this month, I had two pulpit supplies as the pandemic was on the rise in the minds of the public. I chose on those occasions Psalm 90, "so teach us to number our days that we might learn wisdom." Now I

cannot say *why* God permitted this pandemic, but would this not be an occasion to "number our days"?

Had I been preaching in a settled pulpit, would I have changed long-term sermon plans to address the crisis? Absolutely. National calamity warrants a dedicated sermon to my congregation. But a couple of caveats are in order. First, deviating from a series needs careful thought. If we deviate too often, we run the risk of "crying wolf" to the congregation. Only *significant* events should be addressed. Second, caution should be exercised that we do not speak for God when we have no information—"God *caused* this event or that event *because*..." During the 9/11 aftermath, well-known preachers suggested that God was judging America for its sin. Perhaps He was, but on what authority did we have to say so? Unless we believe we have some form of direct contact with God and He *tells* us this is why He did something, we better be careful not to charge Him with a reason for the event. I am not saying we refuse to recognize the hand of God. We just cannot say with authority why God does what He does when He has not spoken. Finally, when we address calamity, we need to temper words of judgement with words of encouragement. We may think God is reigning down misery on humanity, and we may believe that He will one day soon bring judgement, but we also need to offer comfort to the Lord's people that He has everything under control. This is His world and He protects His own (Psalm 121). We may wish to offer comfort, but should we not also offer warning, if appropriate?

By all means preach *to the today* if it warrants a message from God. Speak His truth with all the authority which He delegates to us through the Word. But remember to speak of both wrath and grace. Both are found in abundance in the written Word of God. We give out the Word and let it do its work. "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12).



This essay is by Jeff Straub, Professor of Historical Theology and Missions at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
