

Peter's First Sermon *Acts 2:14a, 22-32* | 4/23/2017

Every preacher goes through the experience of preaching a first sermon. So did the great apostle Peter. And it's recorded in today's reading in Acts.

At first glance, Peter seems totally unqualified to preach. He hadn't spent his last three years in seminary, but in the school of apostolic embarrassment. Here are just a few snapshots from his resume:

- + He was the one who rightly identified Jesus as Messiah but then rebuked the Son of God because he didn't agree with Jesus' cross-shaped agenda (Matthew 16:13-23).
- + This fisherman had a chance to actually walk on water rather than sailing on it, but his lack of faith made him sink (Matthew 14:22-33).
- + When Jesus needed his prayerful support the most, there in the garden of Gethsemane, Peter fell asleep (Mark 14:37).
- + Having boldly proclaimed that he would follow Jesus even unto death (Matthew 26:35; Mark 14:31; Luke 22:33; John 13:37), he instead denied that he even knew Jesus -- not once, but three times (Luke 22:59-62).
- + When he found out that Jesus was alive, his first response was to go back to his old job -- fishing (John 21:3).

If you were looking for a qualified preacher to deliver the first Christian sermon ever, you'd probably look over this track record and ask the divine Bishop to send you someone else.

Then again, Scripture reveals time and time again that God often doesn't call the most qualified, but qualifies the called instead. Although Peter was, to some extent, a bumbling, impetuous disciple before his first sermon, he had learned the truth about Jesus the hard way. No one knew better than he that Jesus could forgive and restore those who had betrayed him out of sin and fear. He had experienced it all, and now he had a story to tell that no theological degree could match.

Jesus told Peter in Galilee to feed the flock, and that's exactly what Peter intended to do. So, he started his sermon.

The introduction wasn't great. When you have to preface a sermon by telling the congregation you and your friends are not drunk, you are not off to the best possible start! (v. 15). Imagine that happening today.

But then Peter makes a move that can't fail. He turns to the Scriptures, perhaps the best place to start a sermon. Quoting from the prophet Joel, he sets the stage for what has happened. The Spirit whom God had promised through the prophet had now come, enabling all who call on the name of the Lord to be saved (vv. 16-21).

He then launches into the body of the sermon, the heart of which is about Jesus (who is the heart of every great sermon!). He recounts the recent events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection from the dead -- events that many in the crowd had witnessed and in which some had actively participated by encouraging Pilate to crucify Jesus.

But what they had meant as a means of getting rid of Jesus, God had meant as the means of fulfilling his promise of salvation, for all his creation and for all who believe. Jesus was "freed from death" in the resurrection, which meant that the power of sin and death itself had been broken (v. 24).

Peter's conclusion is a "drop the mic" moment. "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses" (v. 32). The one who was crucified is now exalted at the right hand of God. He initiated the pouring out of the Holy Spirit they'd just witnessed (v. 33). They had looked for a Messiah of the line and in the military mold of David, but they had received a greater and very different Messiah. They'd received the very one whom David himself had called "Lord" (vv. 34-35). The Jesus they crucified is Lord and Messiah (v. 36).

Peter's first sermon boils down the essential content of the gospel into a message that would be repeated over and over again by people who have never needed seminary degrees in order to preach. It's the simple affirmation that *the Jesus who was crucified is the Jesus who has been raised from the dead, and all of us are witnesses to that fact. We see it through the eyes of faith, and we bear witness to that truth by pointing to Scripture and in the way in which we live our lives.*

Peter's sermon is the first, last and most important message that followers of Jesus should be preaching. In fact, every Christian sermon in history proceeds from this message! There are, of course, many other things for the church to consider -- care of the poor and marginalized, worship and sacraments, Bible study and prayer, life in the community of faith, even the prospect of martyrdom -- but all of that is contingent on Jesus Christ being raised from the dead.

Which brings me to my first sermon. (Well, maybe not my first. I did write something for an assignment in fourth grade I called my first sermon, but I never preached it.)

I was still in college and working in Gettysburg the summer after my junior year. The seminarian who ran the program of which I was a part offered me the opportunity to supply preach at a "three-point parish". (That means you go to the first church, lead worship, jump into your car with your robes still on, drive to the next church, and arrive just as worship is beginning.) I arrived so early at the first church that I embarrassed the farm wife who came over to ring the church bell to call folks to worship, since she was still in her housecoat and slippers. The bell must have worked, since seven people showed up for worship.

My first sermon was certainly not the most entertaining, theologically complex or longest of my ministry. (Remember, I had to get on to that next church in time!) But I do recall my central point. I said that as Christians, what we turn to, what we focus on, what we lift up for others to see as the center of our faith, is the cross. But we cannot understand what we are looking at when we look at the cross unless we see it through the lens of the Resurrection. It is the Resurrection that brings the cross into focus and changes it from a symbol of death into a divine path to eternal life.

Some 43 years later, I look back on that sermon, and I don't think I did too badly. It was fairly close to Peter's message of "Jesus, whom you crucified, was raised from the dead by God." (It also was close to another model for preaching -- "Stand up, speak up, sit down.") It got to the heart of the matter without too much embellishment.

New Testament scholar and former Anglican bishop N.T. Wright tells the story of getting into a cab in London one day whereupon the driver, seeing Wright's clergy collar, asked what he did for a living. Wright responded that he was, in fact, a bishop.

"Ah," the driver said, "you Church of England people. You're still having all that trouble about women bishops, aren't you?" Wright admitted that that was indeed the case.

"The way I look at it is this," replied the driver. "If God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, all the rest is basically just ... rock 'n' roll."

Now whether you are standing in a pulpit or behind the wheel of a cab, that's a sermon that will always preach! So get out there and preach it!

Pastor Keith