

Bishop's Institute e-Newsletter original:

How to Listen to a Sermon by the Rev. Dr Earl Palmer



As an outstanding expository preacher Earl Palmer has taught pastors and priests a lot of good things about preaching. Here, for the Bishop's Institute e-Newsletter, Dr Palmer offers words of encouragement and advice to lay men and women on how a Christian sitting in a pew might open heart and mind to receive the Word of God through listening to a sermon. His article is attached and I strongly encourage you to read and enjoy it.

But first, it might be helpful to explain a little about Dr Palmer's commitment to what is called *expositional* preaching in contrast to *thematic* preaching. The latter is what we more often hear from the pulpit and I confess, personally, the category of preaching in which my sermons usually fall.

In an interview Dr Palmer gave to Seattle Pacific University's *Response* journal he explained how he came to read the Bible and how that led further to his commitment to expository preaching. He came to Christian faith and to know the Bible by accepting an invitation to a men's Bible study group while an undergraduate at the University of California-Berkeley. Of that encounter he writes:

I saw men my own age looking at the New Testament and reading it through adult eyes... I had to go out and buy a Bible.

This led to "three renaissance years" at Princeton Seminary, where he gained experience as a Bible study leader. Of leading a Bible study he writes:

I wasn't trying to be an evangelist. I was just opening the text. ... I became convinced that if I could get someone to look at the text, sooner or later the text would win their respect, and it would always point them to its living center: Jesus Christ. And when Jesus Christ has your respect, that's not very many inches away from faith.

In the Response article Dr Palmer goes on to explain what bothers him about thematic preaching:

When a preacher proclaims his views on a theme, bolstered with Scripture verses, the congregation misses an opportunity to experience textual revelation...

If you just tell them something, that doesn't mean they've got it. Rather than trying to steer the text toward an issue, Palmer recommended that leaders let the text steer.

He defined *expositional* preaching as:

The task of enabling the text to make its own point, within the whole context of the gospel, and then affirming that message with persuasiveness and joyful urgency to the people in today's language.

According to Dr Palmer:

Once congregations understand the Bible in its original context, then they can explore what it conveys to them today.

This dynamic encounter with the text, he says, may help listeners:

See it before you [the pastor] say it ... and that's the most electric moment in preaching. When a pastor allows listeners to make their own journey to revelation-- the gospel becomes personal.

[Click here to read Earl Palmer's 'How to Listen to a Sermon'](#)

Excerpt from the article: *Remember always that there is a mystery that can happen at the heart of every genuine affirmation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ – when the Holy Spirit completes and fulfills the sermon by a human preacher with communication of the good news of faith, hope and love. That becomes the amazing grace – the very best, “ah ha” moment!*

How to Listen to a Sermon

By the Rev. Dr Earl Palmer

In almost every worship service there is a time when a preacher speaks words of reflections and of exposition on sacred scripture. This can be described as a communication between the preacher and the listener/congregant present at the same moments – up close, across the space of a church or cathedral, or electronically by way of zoom.

There is, however, a special responsibility for the office of preacher, priest, pastor – as it calls for the person to be an expositor of the Word of the Lord. There is a mandate to present the Gospel in a way that the listener can discover the truth for themselves and experience – the “ah ha” moment. As stated by Pascal, “People are generally better persuaded by the reasons which they have themselves discovered rather than by those which have come into the mind of others.” (Blaisé Pascal, *Pensees* #10) While the exchange does not have the marks of a regular conversation it can be a time when the Lord speaks through the preacher to the person sitting in the pew with ears to hear.

The preacher as a servant of Christ needs to prepare for the event of preaching through prayer and study and to humbly ask the Holy Spirit for direction so as to bring the message of the Gospel that is most needed for the people who are listeners at the occasion of time and space. The preacher then has as his/her task and responsibility as stated in these sets of moments. The preacher is set apart and expected to be faithful to the scriptures and present the word of the Lord.

The congregant who is a believer in Christ also has his or her own vital responsibility in the same moments. That responsibility is to pray for the one who is chosen to speak and to pray that the preacher will have the freedom and clarity to give a message from the Lord; and to add that the pastor will know the encouragement from God and the warm openness of the people. This is a precious time when the Lord can speak through the person up front in the pulpit – a person called to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ.

The congregant is fortunate to have the additional opportunity to recall and/or to reflect in the time afterward and consider what has been presented. The question then becomes “How do I listen and think about these moments as a believer in the truth and grace of the eternal good news about Father, Son and Holy Spirit?” Permit me to reflect on the act of listening and thinking during this preaching and teaching set of moments: “What might I be aware of in listening to a sermon?” “What are some ways that might help me to better listen?”

Be present in terms of your whole being. This is most important. I suggest bringing an open mind that can listen with the idea of learning. A generous openness on your part becomes an advantage and guards against filtering the words through one’s own bias or preconceived ideas that will limit what he or she hears. Understanding includes being aware of the facial expressions and body language of the speaker that communicate and punctuate important points. Consider how best to keep focus while listening and avoid letting your mind wander and being distracted by the setting or the people near by. If writing notes on paper helps to remember than consider being a note taker. For me sometimes being a doodler while listening helps me to

remember spoken words and I can quickly write down brief thoughts after the person is finished speaking.

Notice how a sermon starts. Does it invite you in? Notice how a sermon concludes. Does it summarize the main points developed over the course of the sermon? Reflect on how each division of time spent is helpful to you as a listener.

Take into consideration every historical reference carefully and note how it relates to the sermon as a whole or to a part of the whole. It is important to find the relevance of the text to the context and clarify a possible meaning for your life.

Pay attention to the stories that happen within texts as in Biblical narratives of events, or are a part of the speakers own imagination and/or experience. You may then connect narratives of stories with highlighted parts as the sermon unfolds. Be aware of the sermon's advocacy concerns and the warrant expressed for any claims made. Be comfortable raising questions in your mind for further discussion at a later time.

Explore the speaker's illustrations that usually are windows into the main themes of the sermon. Ask yourself how do these windows work for you? Are they memorable? Do they trigger more thoughts?

Watch for words that need definition either within your own knowledge resource or with question marks for later clarification. Did you have a moment when you could say, "I see this myself in the text." What did you discover for yourself?

Listen overall for the interpretations of the Biblical text that allow you to explore the meaning of a passage. Note the faithful use of scripture in the building of the message.

Restate for yourself the major themes and discoveries that were for you the most memorable parts. The preacher is set apart and expected to be faithful to the scriptures and present the word of the Lord. Discuss with others and/or ask yourself these questions: Was the Gospel presented clearly to me? Am I encouraged to study the text or texts that are at the content source of this sermon? What did I learn? What are areas that I need to better understand? What questions did the sermon raise for me? What was encouraging to my mind, my heart? What am I left to pray about as an outcome of the message? What am I encouraged to do/how am I encouraged to act/ behave/ live as a result of what I learned from the Lord of the sermon's gospel?

You have now become a trained sermon listener, and almost every priest, preacher or parish pastor I know will delight in meeting you at the narthex after the benediction – naturally being careful to stay safe with social distance observed.

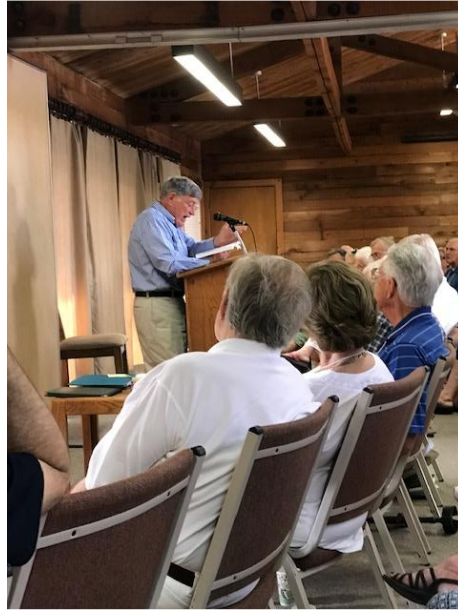
Earl F. Palmer

Postscript #1

A sermon needs to be seen as the beginning of conversations with a preacher and/or with trusted co-listeners. It is often the feedback and review that makes the sermon become one of significance among the listeners in a lasting way.

Postscript #2

Remember always that there is a mystery that can happen at the heart of every genuine affirmation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ – when the Holy Spirit completes and fulfills the sermon by a human preacher with communication of the good news of faith, hope and love. That becomes the amazing grace – the very best, “ah ha” moment!



Earl Palmer speaking September 8, 2018 at Camp Weed at a Bishop's Institute Weekend