



HOM 302-A/502-A
Essentials of Expository Preaching
Winter 2012
Tuesday 6:30 - 9:15 pm

Tuesday, February 14, 2012

Preaching Psalms and Wisdom Literature

“[Poetry] has the virtue of being able to say twice as much as prose in half the time, and the drawback, if you do not give it your full attention, of seeming to say half as much in twice the time.” (Christopher Frye)

I. Observations

- A. Psalms are musical poems.
- B. Wisdom literature (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon) provide practical advice on how to make choices and live well in God’s world, both horizontally and vertically.
- C. Proverbs provides practical wisdom. Job and Ecclesiastes show us the limitations of wisdom. We need to interpret each wisdom book in light of the others.
- D. These genres make specific demands on preachers. Our typical exegetical models can work against us in these genres.
- E. We need to preach these parts of Scripture in order to give our people the full counsel of God.

II. Interpretive Guidelines

A. Psalms

- 1. The psalms are primarily human words to God or about God, rather than God’s words for us. However, they are also God’s word to us.
- 2. They are generally not propositions or imperatives or stories. They do not primarily teach doctrine or moral behavior.
- 3. Psalms provide a model for us. They teach us how to praise God, how to relate honestly to him, and how to reflect on what he has done for us. They invite us to enter into the experience of the psalmist.
- 4. They address the mind through the heart.

5. There are different kinds of psalms: hymns, thanksgiving, descriptive praise, declarative praise, narrative praise, historical psalms, laments, imprecatory psalms, and royal/messianic psalms.
6. The psalms require that we understand poetry:
 - a) imagery and figurative language
 - b) intense emotion
 - c) parallelism (synonymous, antithetical, synthetic), chiasm, acrostic, inclusio
7. Think of psalms in terms of reflection, response, and formation:
 - a) Does the psalm help us reflect on God - who he is and what he has done?
 - b) Does the psalm call us to respond to God in some way, such as worship or trust?
 - c) Does the psalm help to form us - to show us how to respond to life and talk to God?
8. Understand that imprecatory psalms call God to be faithful to his covenant promises. They are not requests for personal vengeance, but for justice. They show us that it is OK to be angry about sin and injustice, but to leave vengeance to God.

B. Proverbs

1. Even Proverbs is theocentric (Proverbs 1:7).
2. Proverbs are short, pithy admonitions, observations, and prohibitions that give practical advice.
3. Proverbs contain both discourses (chapters 1-9 and 31) and seemingly unrelated collections of proverbs (chapters 10-30).
4. Understand that Proverbs do not offer promises but guidelines and principles for living that work most of the time.
5. Look for dueling proverbs that give a nuanced picture (e.g. Proverbs 26:4-5).

C. Job

1. Job presents multiple voices. The message of Job is not found in individual speeches but in the overall plot and characterization.
2. The main theme of Job is not suffering. It is about wisdom, and how *not* to apply it. It recognizes that suffering is often a mystery, and that the only appropriate response is to trust God who is wise and powerful.
3. The speakers generally act as foils for the message of the book.

4. Understand and develop key themes:
 - a) God is sovereign; we are not.
 - b) God is always wise and just, but he doesn't always explain his actions to us.
 - c) God expects us to trust him even when we don't understand.

D. Ecclesiastes

1. Ecclesiastes represents an intellectual search for the truth.
2. The theme of Ecclesiastes: If a person makes money, power, status, pleasure, work, or any created thing the most important thing, they will be deeply disappointed.
3. Ecclesiastes requires that we make some key interpretive decisions:
 - a) Are there two narrators (a frame narrator who introduces and concludes the book, and the Qohelet)?
 - b) Is it an expression of cynical wisdom, or an expression of how we should enjoy life in a world in which we die?
4. Understand and develop key themes:
 - a) God as the one reality that makes sense
 - b) Our inability to understand God and his ways
 - c) Human action does not add up to anything meaningful
 - d) Death is the great equalizer

E. Song of Solomon

1. The Song of Solomon is a hybrid genre of wisdom and love poetry.
2. Look for what the book reveals about God and us. Develop a God-honoring theology of sex.
3. Don't make some common mistakes.
 - a) Don't allegorize it.
 - b) Don't overdramatize it.
 - c) Don't preach in an inappropriate way (e.g. preaching to a young audience, or sensationalizing the book).
4. Look for some larger theological themes.

III. Preaching Steps

A. In all books

1. Focus on what the text reveals about God and about us. Don't preach anthropocentric sermons!
2. Remember that these books are written under the Mosaic covenant in the context of a nation belonging to God.
3. Stay very sensitive to the genre of these texts. Use your imagination. Don't preach them like you would epistles.
4. Raise the tensions that the text does, and resolve them the way that the text does. Get comfortable with raising tension in your sermons.
5. Look for New Testament references to these passages, and for how the themes are developed later in Scripture.

B. Psalms

1. Preach the whole psalm as a literary unit.
2. Ask what the psalm is doing, and what we should do in response.
3. Create an emotional outline.
4. Match the tone of the psalm in your preaching.
5. Use the ear and the imagination.

C. Proverbs

1. Preach observations, not promises.
2. Don't preach selfish behavior, humanism, or materialism.
3. Preach both the longer sections (chapters 1-9) and thematic collections.

D. Ecclesiastes

1. Consider preaching thematically. Break the book apart into its themes and preach the passages that deal with themes together.
2. Preach each passage in light of the entire message.

E. Job and Song of Solomon

1. Preach the arc of the whole book.
2. Consider preaching the themes of the book, rather than preaching passage by passage.
3. Be pastorally sensitive in how you preach explicit material.