God spoke the Ten Commandments to Moses at Mount Sinai in 1446 B.C. In His speaking, God said, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Ex. 20:8). Luther asks, “What does this mean?” and answers, “We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it” (Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation, Third Commandment).

Following His Baptism and temptation in the wilderness, “Jesus began to preach” (Matt. 4:17). Jesus spent much of His earthly life preaching — preaching is that important!

St. Paul instructs us as to how God gives saving faith: “For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? … So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:13–14, 17).

Preaching and hearing the Word of God is a most sacred event. What takes place in preaching is beyond the comprehension of this world. God’s people go to church to hear God speaking to them. Martin Luther tells us that “Christ Himself is present when I preach” (AE 23:386).

This is the significance of a pastor being a called and ordained servant of the Word — standing in the stead of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the living Word. And so today, in 2019, God continues to preach the Word into the ears and souls of His people. Through the preached Word, the Holy Spirit is continually creating and sustaining saving faith in His dear children.

Rev. Dr. James Baneck, executive director of LCMS Pastoral Education

WHAT THE HEARERS want to hear

“I need Law and Gospel, both every time, delivered in a way that teaches about the context of the reading and its direct application to our lives today.”

“I just tell me I stink at keeping the commandments, tell me to repent, remind me Jesus forgives me despite it all, and then lead me to the Lord’s Supper.”

“I love the way our pastor can preach the Law, but in the end he always reassures us of our salvation that we have in Jesus Christ!”

“I want to hear the Law specifically and the Gospel specifically — the difference between ‘Jesus died on the cross’ and ‘Jesus died on the cross for you.’ Nothing you have done will negate that, and that is big.”

“I long to hear my pastors preach, because every week this big, lousy sinner needs to hear that my Lord not only bled and died to pay for my sin, but that He delights in me … not because of my successes, but in spite of my failings.”

“That which I believe I need to hear is, at times, contrary to what I actually need to hear. So, Christ crucified is a safe balance. ‘Good preaching’ is timeless and centered on the Word of God, namely, the liturgical texts of the day.”

“A good sermon has fewer anecdotes and stories. I like it when the pastor gets to the point before my squirmy kids have made it impossible for me to listen anymore.”
On Oct. 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany, to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, LCMS President Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison commissioned a project to help pastors work together to improve their preaching of the Gospel across the board.

In recognition of this anniversary, we went back 502 years to interview Luther on the great Reformation emphasis to preach the Word of God for the faith and life of God’s people.

**Is God really at work through the preaching of the pastor?**

**LUTHER:** Yes, I hear the sermon; but who is speaking? The minister? No indeed! You do not hear the minister. True, the voice is his; but my God is speaking the Word which he preaches or speaks. Therefore I should honor the Word of God that I may become a good pupil of the Word.¹

**What is the purpose of preaching Jesus Christ?**

**LUTHER:** Christ wants to be preached in such a way that we believe in Him.²

**What does it mean to preach Christ?**

**LUTHER:** To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it.³

**Can simple preaching really deliver Christ to the hearer?**

**LUTHER:** No painter can depict Christ as accurately to you with his colors as I have depicted Him with my preaching.⁴

**Why is preaching Christ so important?**

**LUTHER:** God takes hold of the contrite [sinner] and justifies him through faith in Christ which He pours into him through the preaching of the Gospel [i.e., Christ], as he took hold of Peter and justified him.⁵

**Whose faith is being created and sustained in preaching Jesus Christ?**

**LUTHER:** Christ ought to be preached to the end that faith in Him may be established that He may not only be Christ, but Christ for you and me, and that what is said of Him and is denoted in His name may be effectual in us. Such faith is produced and preserved in us by preaching why Christ came.⁶

**Do you believe the preacher’s job is to interpret the Bible for God’s people?**

**LUTHER:** And what do those who at this day preach? Do they not expound and declare the Scriptures? In a word, if the Scripture be obscure or ambiguous, what need was there for its being sent down from heaven? Truth and doctrine are to be preached always, openly, and firmly, and are never to be dissembled or concealed; for there is no offence in them; they are the staff of uprightness.⁷

**Is preaching from the Bible all that important?**

**LUTHER:** Nor should any doctrine be taught or heard in the church except the pure Word of God … This is not preaching that gains favor from men and from the world.⁸

**Is preaching the same as a theological speech?**

**LUTHER:** Cursed be every preacher who aims at lofty topics in the church, looking for his own glory and selfishly desiring to please one individual or another. When I preach here I adapt myself to the circumstances of the common people. I don’t look at the doctors and masters, of whom scarcely forty are present, but at the hundred or the thousand young people and children. It’s to them that I preach, to them that I devote myself, for they, too, need to understand.⁹

**How important is it that God’s Word is clearly understood through preaching?**

**LUTHER:** We shall, to the best of our ability, expound the Gospel’s meaning and not hide it from the common people, frightening them away with fabricated subtleties, as do the scholastics. There is no need for many clever, hairsplitting considerations, but only for simple and plain attention to the words of the text.¹⁰

**How is the pastor to rightly divide God’s Word in his sermons?**

**LUTHER:** Christ Himself teaches these two articles [Law and Gospel] in such an order. One must preach repentance [Law] and the forgiveness of sins [Gospel] in His name.¹¹

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¹ What Luther Says (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 1125.
² Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 6–8, AE 23:381.
⁴ Galatians, AE 26:199.
⁵ The Disputation Concerning Man, AE 34:173.
⁶ AE 31:367.
⁸ Galatians, AE 26:58.
⁹ Table Talks, AE 54:235.
¹⁰ Sermons K. Maria Christmas, AE 52:41.
¹¹ Against the Heavenly Prophets, AE 49:82.
On Oct. 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany. In commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, LCMS President Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison commissioned Preach the Word, stating that, “We put together the Preach the Word project to help pastors work together to improve our preaching of the Gospel across the board.”

In recognition of this anniversary, we went back 502 years to interview Luther on the great Reformation emphasis to preach the Word of God for the faith and life of God’s people.

**Do you believe preaching the Word is more important than writing about it?**

LUTHER: Christ did not command the apostles to write, but only to preach. The Church is not a pen-house, but a mouth-house.12

**What is the role of the Holy Spirit in preaching?**

LUTHER: The Word is the channel through which the Holy Spirit is given. The lips are the public reservoirs of the church. You see, unless the Word is preached publicly, it slips away. The more it is preached, the more firmly it is retained. Reading it is not as profitable as hearing it, for the live voice teaches, exhorts, defends, and resists the spirit of error. Satan … flees at the speaking of the Word.13

**What is the role of the pastor in preaching?**

LUTHER: Would to God that we could gradually train our hearts to believe that the preacher’s words are God’s Word and that the man addressing us is a scholar and a king. To be sure … all I hear is the voice of the preacher, or of my brother or father, and I behold only a man before me. But I view the picture correctly if I add that the voice and words of father or pastor are not his own words and doctrine, but those of our Lord and God.14

**Any concluding thoughts about preaching?**

LUTHER: No heart is ever satisfied unless it hears Christ preached properly in the gospel; when this happens, a person comes to Bethlehem and finds Him; he also comes and stays in Judea and thanks His God eternally; then he is satisfied. Then, too, God is praised and confessed.15

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12 Luther, Martin, Companion Volume: Introduction to the Evangelical Writings (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 63.
Striving for EXCELLENCE

God’s people cry out for excellent preaching. At the same time, every pastor wants to be an excellent preacher. Therefore, the Preach the Word project has been developed. Preach the Word is designed to help pastors work together to improve their preaching through video modules with accompanying resources, and by interacting with seminary professors and fellow preachers.

Preach the Word is for pastors, but wouldn’t it be wonderful if laypersons watched these videos also? Completed modules can be found at lcms.org/preach-the-word:

• The Use of Story in Preaching by the Rev. Dr. David Schmitt
• The Use of Biblical Text in Sermon Preparation by the Rev. Dr. Dean Nadasdy
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The authors of these modules are renowned teachers in the church and experts in their field. Many thanks to these men for supplying the church and her pastors with these great resources!

“… be able to preach faithfully, creatively and skillfully.”

“… gain the accountability to be disciplined and intentional about growing as a preacher.”

“… gain variety in my preaching style so that my congregation will continue to hear the message of Christ, the crucified and risen Lord, week after week.”

“… improve my delivery and thereby improve my congregation’s hearing, attention and retention of the preached Word.”

“… gain greater knowledge and skill in the preaching task as a whole. I desire to strive for excellency in preaching, taking the Confessions seriously when they say, “Nothing brings people to church like good sermons.””

“… review some fundamentals and identify any potential bad habits I have established over the last 20 years.”

“… become better at applying God’s Word to the lives of those within my congregation and applying to those who are new to the Word, as well as those with a mature faith.”

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MODULE FOCUS: Preaching the Baptized Life

“The baptized life is the Christian life — dying and rising, repenting and following, living for Jesus. This module’s focus, the baptized life, equips pastors to preach the Third Use of the Law or sanctification, which is always challenging for Lutheran pastors. Pastors will be able to more faithfully extol and lift up the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, one of the crown jewels of the Christian life.”

— Rev. Dr. Reed Lessing, senior pastor at St. Michael Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne, Ind., and author of the Preach the Word module, Preaching the Baptized Life

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