Ministry in the Presence of Christ Jesus
II Timothy 4:1-5

The warfare had been long and the strife fierce for the aging Apostle. The distant triumph song with its promising refrain that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus rings in his ears; he awaits the appearing of his Lord and ours, who will bring him through prison and death to the final victory. But this old soldier of Jesus Christ who has slogged through Asia Minor, marched in the desert, and sailed the sea enduring ship wreck and scorn will not fade away. The time of his departure seems to be near. He will be poured out as a drink offering. The world would soon be done with Paul but Paul would never be done with the world. The Word that he was ordained to preach will have free course; it is not bound. It will speed on accomplishing the purpose for which God sent it.

How freely this Word moves on we see in Timothy who is put in the office to preach that Word in season and out of season. We are here this afternoon because that Word has brought us to faith in Jesus Christ, calling together a Christian congregation here in this place. There is no church without the ministry and there is no ministry without the church. So today the Lord is giving yet another man who stand in that long line of men that goes back to Paul and Timothy, yes, to Jesus Himself to preach the Word of Christ which alone creates and sustains faith.

There are many things that could be said to you, Derek, on this day of your ordination into the office of the holy ministry. Certainly it is day of thanksgiving and joy as you together with Gretchen and Katie reflect on the route that brought you here. Your parents and family, friends and fellow-Christians have encouraged you in your aspiration to be a pastor and have supported you with their gifts. You have devoted yourself to careful study and prayer. You have made some sacrifices and faced some disappointments. A track record of deep involvement at your home congregation, St. Paul’s in Aberdeen, South Dakota, University Lutheran Chapel in Minneapolis and a vicarage at Trinity Lutheran Church in Palo Alto, CA along with dozens of seminary classes have shaped you into the confessor of Christ that you are today, competent and well-prepared for office that you are about to assume. But all of that as memorable and important as it is not the focus of this day. When all is said and done is all about Jesus Christ.

That is the Apostle Paul’s point in his inspired reminder to Timothy. In fact, the Apostle puts in terms of solemn charge, a holy mandate that he gives to Timothy. It is a charge given in the presence of God the Father and His Son, Christ Jesus who is the judge of the living and the dead. The language is echoed in the rite of ordination as you will be asked, in a few minutes to give a public and joyful testimony of your allegiance to God’s Word and the Lutheran Confessions. Such a confession is made not only before men, but before
the Lord of heaven and earth. You are pledging that your doctrine and life, your preaching and giving out of the sacraments, your teaching and pastoral care will conform to the divine Word and the Book of Concord. These are powerful and weighty promises, sobering vows that should cause any man being ordained to tremble just a bit. But your confidence, Derek, comes not from the strength of your own good resolve but from the Lord who is faithful and true, the Lord whose Word endures even when the heavens and earth pass away.

Ordination puts a man under orders. Christ made you His own, Derek, in Holy Baptism when He put His name on you. You belong to Him. Now we confess that our Lord Jesus Christ through the instrumentality of His church has called you into the Office of the Holy Ministry. Your ordination confirms that fact. With God’s Word and prayer, with His blessing and the laying on of hands you are now being set in place as Christ’s servant, one who now will speak as the liturgy constantly reminds you, in the stead and by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What you are to say and do comes from the Lord. One of the reasons that pastors in our church wear vestments is that it covers up the man. The focus is not on the man but the office. The pastor speaks Jesus’ words: “I forgive you all your sins.” The pastor speaks Jesus’ words: “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The pastor speaks Jesus’ words: “Take, eat this is my body…Take, drink this is my blood.”

In our text today, the Apostle Paul is reminding Timothy of the Lord to whom he is accountable for his stewardship of the office and words given Timothy to speak as Christ’s man. Now, Derek, these words are given to you. You are to preach the word. God is putting you in the pastoral office to preach, to speak not out of your own cleverness or the store of your insights, but His words which are spirit and life. We have learned how to do all kinds of things with words. We can persuade through the power of finely-structured rhetoric. Our words can be daggers that cut deep and scar memories for a lifetime. We know all too well how words can be used to spin the truth and make it deceptive and deceiving. But the Word of which Paul speaks and comments to Timothy, the Word that Derek is mandated to speak is not message of human origin. It is the Word that comes from God Himself. It is the Word of Christ. It is the Word of His cross, a word that kills and makes alive. It is the Word that creates faith where there was only unbelief. “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ” says the Lord’s Apostle. “And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?” (Romans 10:14-15).

God does the sending. Just as surely as He sent the twelve on Easter evening with His words: “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21), the Lord is now sending another man with His words to preach. What is entailed in this preaching the Apostle makes plain in our text. It no seasonable activity like driving over I-40 to look at the fall colors or skiing in the winter. It is work that goes on in season and out of season. There is never a time when the voice of preaching is to be silent. Preaching dares also to
speak the hard words, words that the old Adam in us would rather not hear—reproof, rebuke, exhortation so that the Gospel can finally ring out in all of its sweetness.

The pastor is to labor in season and out of season, Paul says, “with complete patience and teaching.” Patience here is the patience of a farmer. The farmer plants the seed and then he waits. So it is with the pastor, he plants the seed and he waits on the Word to do its work, germinating and growing and producing whatever harvest God brings about. The great comfort that our Lord gives you, Derek, is that the Word works. The familiar parable of the sower and the seed is God’s own word of encouragement when we are tempted to frustration and disappointment. God’s Word will not return to Him empty. It will accomplish the purpose for which He sent it. So in the words of Martin Franzmann’s eloquent hymn: “Preach you the Word and plant it home/And never faint; the Harvest Lord/Who gave the sower seed to sow/Will watch and tend His planted Word” (259:5 LW).

Such patience is always required in the ministry but it seems especially needed in our own day and it is, perhaps, no where more needed then in campus ministry. University students are the most “un-churched” segment of the population. Campuses represent a kind of pluralism that is becoming increasingly dominant in our culture. One religion is judged as good (or as worthless) as another. Spirituality is in vogue but spirituality is not saving faith in Jesus Christ. It is taken for granted that the primary ethical principle is “autonomy.” That is, literally, we are laws unto ourselves. Talk about itching ears and people who accumulate for themselves teachers who will scratch that itch! Look around. There are all kinds of religious groups that traffic with the “you’ve got a need, we’ve got a creed” philosophy. In a world of religious diversity, a world that veers off into the myths of self-made gods, you are to proclaim Jesus Christ and Himself crucified for there is no salvation anywhere else in this universe but in the baby in Bethlehem’s manger and that man of Calvary.

“Preach one thing” said Luther, “the wisdom of the cross.” And as you preach that cross be prepared also to carry the cross. “Endure suffering” is how Paul puts it. What shape the cross will take in your life and ministry, only the Lord knows. It will be there but with the cross, also the promise of the crucified and risen Savior to sustain you and bring you through to the final victory of the resurrection.

The Apostle wraps up his charge to Timothy and by extension to all pastors, including the man who will be made a pastor today with the call “to do the work of an evangelist” and thus “fulfill your ministry. Literally it is do the work of a preacher of the Gospel for it is in the preaching of Jesus Christ, the One who justifies the ungodly by forgiving them their sins that the ministry is fulfilled. “Christ has left nothing to the world except the Gospel” said Luther. Jesus did not leave us a set of principles for successful Christian living, a new ethic, or a novel philosophy but the Gospel, the good news that He is the Lord over your sin and death; that He is your righteousness and your life. God doesn’t keep that good news a secret. He causes it to be preached, to be proclaimed throughout the world so that sinners might receive the forgiveness of sins and be raised to the newness of life. For that reason God has established the preaching office. And into that
office, God gives us today another gift in the person of a man who will speak Jesus’
words, words that will not be bound but preached to the joy and edifying of Christ’s holy
people and the extension of His kingdom. So we pray the words of the hymn-writer for
you, Derek and the congregation committed to your care:

And for your Gospel let us dare
To sacrifice all treasure.
Teach us how to bear your blessed cross,
To find in you all pleasure.
Oh, grant us steadfastness
In joy and distress,
Lest we, Lord, you forsake.
Let us by grace partake of endless joy and gladness (LW 293:4).

Amen.

-Prof. John T. Pless
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