**IN A NUTSHELL**

***Preachers and Listeners***

Let me summarize this sermon in a nutshell.

What did you think of that sentence?

To the members here at Northwest that hear me preach I imagine your first reaction might be “Yeah. Right. Good luck with that, pal!” Usually, when some members hear me say, “And my final point is…” they roll their eyes and drift back to sleep.

Preachers have forever been labeled “long-winded” or “wind-bags” because they seem full of hot-air. After attempting to preach for 45 years (I’ve attempted this craft since 1975) I have heard every possible description you can imagine, some subtle, some blunt. “Get to the point preacher!” “Come on man, get ‘er done!” “For a sermon to be immortal it doesn’t have to be eternal.” “When Paul preached till midnight Eutychus fell asleep and died.” “The text says, ‘watch and pray’ – but your sermon says, ‘Go to sleep.’”

The wife says to preacher at the door: “Brother, you put him to sleep, you go wake him up.”

Winston Churchill was fond of quoting the English preacher Charles Spurgeon by saying, “A speaker with a great deal of well-prepared material will probably not exceed forty minutes; when he has less to say he will go fifty minutes; and when he has nothing to say he will need an hour.”

Woodrow Wilson beat Churchill to that punchline when he was president. He was asked how long it took him to prepare a ten-minute speech. His answer, “two weeks.” How long for a half-hour? “One week.” How long for an hour? “I am ready now!”

But can I take you back to that midnight-length sermon by Paul in Troas? Read it in Acts 20:7 *“Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight.”*

While you are open to that chapter, keep reading the rest of chapter 20 so I can make my point… briefly ☺.

We have no way of knowing when Paul actually started his sermon. Did he begin at 11:35 pm? Or 9:00 pm? Or at the scriptural Sunday night service of 6:00 pm, with two songs (sitting), a prayer and song (standing), then the traditional song before he sermon (“Ready to suffer”)? We just don’t know.

But if you read this entire passage in Acts 20, you get some great insights into the heart of Paul, the long-winded preacher:

* Paul was full of faith and confidence in the Lord: “*don’t worry, he’s alive*.” (v. 10)
* Paul earned people’s respect through his suffering for the Gospel: *“You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you, serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews*” (v. 18-19)
* Paul was fearless in his preaching: “*I never shrank back from telling you what you needed to hear*.” (v. 20)
* Paul was Christ-centered and cross-focused: “*testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ*… *the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God”* (v. 21, 24)
* Paul was faithful to God and the Gospel: *“Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.*” (v. 26-27)
* Paul was pure in his motives: “*I have never coveted anyone’s silver or gold or fine clothes…I have worked with my own hands to supply my own needs*.” (vv. 33-34)
* Paul practiced what he preached: “*I have been a constant example*…” (v. 35)

It’s no wonder that when he had finished speaking and was getting ready to leave, “*they all cried as they embraced and kissed him good-bye*.” (v. 37)

Sermons. How long should they be? I suppose all preachers could condense their lessons down “***in a nutshell***.” That idiom suggests we can whittle the sermon to the size of a few words that could be squeezed into the hull of a walnut (which is actually where that phrase came from).

For a sermon do you want a Cliff’s Notes version? Don’t act like you don’t know what I’m talking about. You remember those yellow and black booklets most students used to bluff the teacher into thinking they had actually read Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* or Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. What many of us did in English Lit class has too often carried over into the pew (or today’s Zoom or Facebook Live). We want the gospel short and sweet. Just the bare-bones. Put it “in a nutshell.”

I see our kids required to sit in five or more classes per day for 40-50 minutes each. I watch folks pay money to attend 2 to 3 hour movies. I know many who play video games for hours at a time. So it saddens me to see a Christian complain at a 35-45 minute sermon once or twice per week. I know I speak from the preacher’s viewpoint and to you that seems one-sided and self-serving. “Guilty as charged.” But I also speak from the disciple’s viewpoint, like Mary, hungry to sit at Jesus’ feet and hear “*that good part which will not be taken away from her*” (Luke 10:38-42). I guess it all depends on what we are interested in. “*For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*” (Matthew 6:21).

I’m all-too aware that many of us who preach are not at Apollos’ skill level (“*an eloquent man and mighty in the scriptures*” – Ac 18:24). Yes, I once dreamed of being a gifted orator, but that proudful boast only reminded me of Paul’s own words: *“​I did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God”* (I Cor. 2:1). Now, as I’ve grown older, I simply put this post-it note (ok, Cliff Note) on the podium before preaching: “*Sir, we would see Jesus*” (Jn. 12:21). I try to be content with that, praying my one or two talents will help a few souls go to heaven.

Until tomorrow… May God help us all, by word, or deed, “*preach the word in season and out of season*.” I love you. - Rick