

The Unthinkable

By Bob Young

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I have only a few more months to contemplate what seems for many of my preaching peers and acquaintances to be the unthinkable—life after preaching. Last year, I notified the church leaders of my intention to retire at the end of 2010. The transition plans are in place, and before long I will not be preaching—at least not as often as I have in the past. Can a preacher not preach? As a fellow-preacher observed just last week—preachers always have something they want to say!

Preaching has always been a part of my professional life. At various gatherings designed to honor full-time servants in the churches, the question is usually, “How long have you been preaching?” The answer depends on what you mean and what measurement should be used, but the answer is that I have been preaching a long time. Should I measure from my first sermon as a high school student (45 years ago)? Should I begin counting after graduation from college when I began full-time employment as a preacher (40 years and counting)? I like to observe that I have preached for 6 decades—the 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, 00s, and 10s. (Overlook the fact that the first and the last of those decades represent limited periods of preaching!)

I started preaching every Sunday (or almost every Sunday—I had the third Sunday of each month off) in the fall of 1967 while I was a student at Wichita State University. There have not been many Sundays since that I did not preach. Even during my dozen years in Christian higher education, I preached most Sundays, usually two sermons plus teaching a Bible class. For about half of those years, I served as an interim minister—in a total of five churches.

This is my life—43 years of preaching; over 4000 sermons prepared and preached (not counting special occasions such as gospel meetings, mission campaigns, lectureships, or funerals). The number is probably nearer 5000. At least that many formal classes taught in churches. Through the years, I have done a lot of “talking”. Does a person one day simply stop talking?

I do not mind being described as a preacher, but when asked about my professional life, I usually describe myself as a minister rather than a preacher. In local church work, preaching has been a very small part of my job. Ministry is a more accurate description for one who serves a congregation and community in various ways. This description has fashioned my self-understanding as well as my understanding of the church and church work. “Preachers” will some time, someday, in some way quit preaching. Ministers never stop ministering and serving.

Thus what is unthinkable for many is for me a new challenge. What new ministry doors will God open? Where will I serve? What new ministries and missions will God unfold? I am a minister—I will keep on ministering, with the strength and freedom God gives. What he will do and what coming years will hold may be unthinkable (unimaginable)—but the reason is that God is a God of surprises, unimaginably bigger and bolder than are we!