Summary

For Martin Luther the sermon was not simply an exercise in which a preacher expounded on the biblical text, taught moral lessons, and reprimanded listeners for their shortcomings. The sermon meant far more than that. Preaching was God’s voice speaking through the minister. Hearing God’s promise of salvation was far more effective than reading it. In terms that echoed medieval theories of demonology, which posited that reading biblical passages aloud exorcized the air, Luther insisted that Satan fled the spoken word of God even if the written form bothered him not a whit. The sermon was the site where Christ confronted Satan in eschatological combat. Minsters made Christ really present from their pulpits and, through their preaching of God’s word, provided the means through which the Holy Spirit “worked,” literally, upon the auditor. Luther’s sense of the sermon was spiritual and physical to the extent that he considered preaching quasi-sacramental in the medieval sense of the opus operatum.

Luther’s theology of preaching was among the most original of his discoveries, but he did not invent the sermon. For 1,500 years Christianity had spread among overwhelmingly illiterate populations, and the oral exposition of scripture was part of Christian services early on. Patristic theologians such as Augustine had preached extensively and left a corpus of manuscript sermons that influenced later exegetes. The advent of printing in the mid-15th century spread the homilies of medieval preachers and their patristic forerunners as never before. Especially popular were postils, model sermons for Sundays and festival days that were available in Latin and vernacular versions. Printing, the spread of the Mendicant preaching orders, improved clerical education, and increasing lay literacy all combined to produce a late medieval preaching renaissance. Martin Luther was born into this renaissance just as he became a trained professional in its tradition. When he died in 1546 he was no longer a late medieval Augustinian, but he had been a preacher by trade for nearly forty years.

Luther preached constantly. None of his other duties took as much of his time. About 2,300 of his sermons survive, which, based on his preaching schedule, represent about half of the sermons he preached. Sermons take up some thirty
Martin Luther, O.S.A. (ˈluːθər; German: [ˈmaʁtɔn ˈlʊtɐ] (listen); 10 November 1483 – 18 February 1546) was a German professor of theology, priest, author, composer, Augustinian monk, and a seminal figure in the Reformation. Luther was ordained to the priesthood in 1507. He came to reject several teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church; in particular, he disputed the view on indulgences. Luther proposed an academic discussion of the practice and efficacy of indulgences in his Ninety Five Theses. These sermons exhibit Luther's lowbrow, down-home, peasant preaching. They are a real treat for persons desiring straight talk on apostolic themes. In respect to the darkness of his age, that's just the style that was needed then. “I often have fears,” complains Luther, “for the condemnation of all men of the present age except those who die in their cradles...no one sees and deplores the awful wrath of God overhanging us” (p. 286.) We too are living in a dark age. First, the correction. I’m holding volume 6 in my hands, and it says that the 8 volume set of Luther’s church postils were published in 1983, then reissued in 1995, each time with the 8 volumes contained in a 4-volume set, two volumes per book. Then in 1996 Baker Book House issued volumes 5-7, which contain the house postils. Fred W. Meuser writes: “Martin Luther is famous as reformer, theologian, professor, translator, prodigious author, and polemicist. He is well known as hymn-writer, musician, friend of students, mentor of pastors, and pastor to countless clergy and laity. Yet he saw himself first of all as a preacher.” Luther gave himself tirelessly to this priority. Luther’s commitment to the pulpit can be clearly seen in his preaching activities. On most Sundays, he preached two or three times, and, by his own admission, “Often I preached four sermons on one day.” In addition, he usually preached at least two to three times during the week, sometimes more. On religious holidays, he preached twice a day. Dr. Martin Luther’s house-postil, vol 2, ohio 1884 (second edition). Sermon on Threefold Righteousness from Philippians 2. Sermons of dr martin luther edited by john nicholas lenker vol. 1.