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Sermon Soup

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Nonfiction

SERMON SOUP

ABIGAIL WISSER

Wallace Scaldwell never even took a step behind the lectern. He was one of the first weekly visiting guest lecturers at Bible college. He cantered up onto the stage, and the energy he radiated made his paunchy grey and purple argyle sweater seem like racing colors. His thick white hair, groomed and pomaded meticulously, glinted under the spotlights. He grinned, paced eagerly, and orated in the southern Baptist manner, purring and shouting and rasping—truly an evangelical thoroughbred. And he was a spitter.

I remember little from his week of lecturing on the book of James. I never could stay awake during the first class period. The cafeteria coffee was weak, and didn't kick in until the second period. So I let my eyes close and seal when Scaldwell stalked past. I always knew when he was coming—whenever he drifted within ten feet, a wall of strong, musky cologne slapped my senses. I would snap my eyes open in time to meet the rolling whites of his eyes, which mimicked his waves of speech about Trials and the Evils of the Tongue and True Religion. Too bad I was under-caffeinated and cynical.

The highlight of that week of lectures was when

he passed me, made a particularly rousing point that required a dynamic squelch of lips and tongue, and sprayed Rachel May in the forehead with a wad of spittle. She recoiled, her pretty face contorting in quiet agony. To my enormous delight, Wallace Scaldwell did not notice at all and moved on, stamping and braying about the Idea of caring for orphans and widows.

I'm jaded. I know it. It's not that I take an issue with Wallace Scaldwell – I take an issue with all the speakers I've heard who boil down the beautiful and essential truths. They all use the same formula for Baptist-style sermon soup: three or four alliterated points with loosely-tied rambling between, and funny anecdotes for flavor. After a few years of being spoon-fed truths, one develops the palette and stomach to discern the quality of a sermon. So much talk of meat and milk – and you can make some delicious stews, cream soups, and chowders with them – but often there is not even milk or meat in the preaching. And now I can taste when preachers have been relying on the same old formula for years, when they heave the hunk of Easter lamb into a pot of water and boil it down with no thought for how it should, historically,

be cooked or seasoned. They replace the cup of wine with a plastic thumbful of grape juice – and the juice is mostly made of concentrated apple juice anyway.

So when Wallace Scaldwell cut up the book of James, freeze-dried the pieces, reconstituted them in weak milk heavily seasoned with Southern spice, and set the whole pot boiling, I turned up my nose. I even saw him spit it in, though I don't think he realized, bless his heart.