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THE REFLECTIVE PREACHER:
EFFECTIVE HABITS FOR HOMILETICAL SELF-ASSESSMENT

By
BRENDA FROBERG LEGRED

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Luther Seminary
In Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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2020

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ABSTRACT

The Reflective Preacher: Effective Habits for Homiletical Self-Assessment

By

Brenda Froberg Legred

Biblical preaching is the key to church growth and health. Research shows that people are choosing not to worship because of mediocre messages from the pulpit. Yet, people are hungry for what God has to say about their life and context. The pastor-preacher must take the preaching task very seriously, devoting time and energy to the endeavor and seeking to continually improve their craft. The problem is that most pastors do not develop effective habits for homiletical self-assessment. This researcher will offer strategies and tools for faithful preaching and ideas for becoming a more reflective preacher. There are acquired skills that pastor-preachers need to pay attention to in order to make preaching more vital for hearers. Developing effective habits for homiletical self-assessment is key to enhancing how listeners hear the claims in scripture and increase their desire and ability to live out their lives of discipleship.

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Thank you to pastors I have known who have inspired me to be a pastor. It is with high praise that I celebrate my pastor colleagues who are remarkable and engaging preachers.

I appreciate what I have learned from my delightful classmates, my engaging professors, the wise members of my parish response group, and my kind and experienced preacher-advisor. The Reverend Dr. Karoline Lewis deserves a special note of gratitude as she is the reason I embarked on this adventure.

Saving the best for last, I thank my husband Joel for his steadfast love and ever-ready encouragement and support for all my adventures.

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CHAPTER 1

THE PROBLEM

Today there is a lot of emphasis on leadership, fund raising, and church growth. Leaders seek the counsel of consultants to help them achieve congregational success. What they often miss is the key to church growth in almost every ministry context. The key is preaching well. Even though the sermon is vitally important to a community, faithful sermons are few and far between and the diminishing number of congregants reflect this trend. Donald Miller, author and CEO of StoryBrand, a company that helps businesses clarify their messages, said “If Protestantism ever dies with a dagger in its back, the dagger will be the Protestant sermon.”¹ Charlie Reeb, senior pastor of Johns Creek United Methodist Church in Johns Creek, Georgia, writes,

If autopsies were performed on many dead churches the cause of death would be clear: pulpit failure. Nothing kills a church faster than poor preaching. Recently Pew and Gallup did research on church growth. The results are a wakeup call to preachers. Pew’s research showed that people looking for a church home value good preaching most of all.² Similarly, Gallup concluded that the number one reason people remain at a church is the quality of the sermons.³ The lesson is clear: if you want to grow your church good preaching must be a top priority. Great preaching alone will not grow vital churches, but you can’t grow vital

¹ Donald Miller, *Say Something! Simple Ways to Make Your Sermons Better* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019), xi.

² Pew Research Center, “Choosing a New Church or House of Worship,” August 23, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/08/23/choosing-a-new-church-or-house-of-worship/> (accessed 1/15/2019).

³ Joshua Pease, “Gallup Research: What Keeps People Coming Back to Church Week after Week Isn’t the Cool Music,” April 27, 2017, <https://churchleaders.com/news/302891-gallup-research-keeps-people-coming-back-church-week-week-isn’t-cool-music.html>.

churches without great preaching. I dare you to show me a healthy and vibrant church that does not have an effective preacher in the pulpit.⁴

In his book *Surviving the Stained-Glass Jungle*, William Self refers to a study done by Samuel Blizzard who asked 1,300 ministers to arrange six pastor role functions in the order of their importance.

Seven hundred replies gave this order: preacher, pastor, priest, teacher, organizer, and administrator. But when the roles were arranged in order of time actually spent, they came out administrator, pastor, priest, organizer, preacher, and teacher. The ministers said that preaching was primary, but they practiced it at the fifth level.⁵

Pastors juggle many responsibilities. Yet if preaching is believed to be as important as pastors indicate when surveyed, then they need to ensure it is a priority.

Despite what we think, other people can lead meetings. Other people can plan worship. Other people can teach Sunday school. Other people can even visit people in the nursing home. But *we* have been asked to preach. . . . The key is that each of us needs to allot time in our own schedules for however long it takes us to prepare well for preaching. Some of us can do great work in four hours. Others of us need twelve. . . . When we are intentional in our sermon preparation, we not only display our love of the Bible but also reveal our love for our congregation. We love our people by loving the task of preaching.⁶

Jesus came preaching (Mark 1:14) and teaching and his sermons changed the world (Matthew 9:35). The early apostles preached to the early church and the Gospel spread like wildfire. They must have known it was the best way to invest their time. Harry Emerson Fosdick, interdenominational pastor of the famed Riverside Church in New York City, said that preachers should spend one hour in the study for every minute

⁴ Charlie Reeb, *Say Something! Simple Ways to Make Your Sermons Better* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019), xiii.

⁵ William L. Self, *Surviving the Stained Glass Jungle* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2011), 57.

⁶ Mary S. Hulst, *A Little Handbook for Preachers: Ten Practical Ways to a Better Sermon by Sunday* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2016), 20-21.

in the pulpit. Sondra Willobee, Senior Pastor at First United Methodist Church in South Lyon, Michigan, wrote: “Collectively, we preachers hold a great number of persons hostage in boredom or frustration when our sermons sag. . . Sagging sermons suggest that Christianity can safely be ignored . . . Our preaching usually falters for lack of craft . . . Weak introduction, vague application, and slow narrative pulse.”⁷ Fred Craddock, Emeritus Professor of Preaching and New Testament in the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, told his students to assume their listeners almost didn’t come to church that morning.⁸ We honor them when we respect the fears, doubts, fatigue, or rebellion that almost kept them from worship.⁹

This researcher has heard from family and friends who are regular worshippers that their pastor’s sermons have not improved over the years. It would seem they have not invested in improving their craft. In contrast, NFL quarterbacks are committed to rigorous self-evaluation by watching, yes studying films of the previous game and films and receiving suggestions from coaches and because of it, they continue to improve. “If the game of football warrants this intensity of focus on intentional improvement, how much more does preaching? The call to communicate the holy heart of God to hope-hungry people is worthy of the preacher’s best efforts. Right?”

This thesis writer embarked on a new adventure: growing her preaching through the Doctor of Ministry in Biblical Preaching coursework at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, in part, because she has heard the statistics on church growth and health but

⁷ Sondra B. Willobee, *The Write Stuff* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 2.

⁸ Betty White, “Candler Professor Practices What He Teaches” (*Atlanta Journal*, May 30, 1987), 1-B.

⁹ Willobee, *The Write Stuff* 26.

especially because she wanted to grow her preaching. During this opportunity, professors from Luther and other seminaries in this and other countries encouraged students to take a hard look at their sermons. The faculty emphasized the importance of reflecting on whether or not pastors had produced faithful sermons. Classmates offered sermon feedback and each student invested time in rewriting old sermons with greatly improved results. This time of assessment proved to be a catalyst for growing preaching. The parish response group in the congregation this thesis writer served said the team experienced a positive and significant difference in her preaching after her June residencies. She shared with them that it was the course teachings, the parish response group's constructive feedback and the time invested in examining sermons that had made the difference. It is this researcher's conclusion pastor-preachers can benefit from effective habits for homiletical self-assessment.

Most pastors she knows do not assess their sermons. They are either ready to be done with the preaching event or they feel there is just not time before the next ministry task or next week's sermon. Most of this researcher's classmates in the Doctor of Biblical Preaching coursework have shared that other than evaluating sermons as part of the class assignments, they have not and do not evaluate their preached sermon. Two of the students said they have a special person who gives them feedback but they do not do any kind of formal sermon review.

For most pastor-preachers the purpose of preaching is the age-old call by God to share the biblically based Gospel of Jesus Christ and to trust the Holy Spirit to use our words to touch hearts no matter how many are gathered. Those with whom this

researcher dialogues declare that they take their preaching task seriously and invest significant time in preparing sermons they hope and pray are faithful.

Our sermonizing still matters in an age when words seem to have less and less meaning. Just as God comes to us in bread and wine, God comes to us in the preached word. The preacher trusts and hopes their offerings in the pulpit become portals for God. Preaching can set people free to do things they never imagined possible. People in the pews can discover meaning for their lives and hope for their futures. A preached word can bring new life to marriages and relationships, free people in addictions, and even send people on risky, life-changing mission trips.

Pastors lead from the pulpit.¹⁰ A pastor is never more of a leader than when they stand before their congregation and preach well. Listen to what Reeb has to say about the importance of the preached sermon.

Preaching is the one act of ministry that does the most good. In one sermon you can provide pastoral care to your entire congregation. You can cast a vision. You can motivate a large group to serve. You can share the gospel to several hearts so that it spreads and multiplies . . . CEOs of Fortune 500 companies would love to have the opportunity to stand before their people once a week and remind them of the company's vision. Week in and week out preparing and delivering sermons is the best stewardship of your time . . . If more preachers spent time improving their preaching half of our problems with church growth would disappear.¹¹

The pastor-preacher's investment of time, energy, and skill in their sermons is priceless.

¹⁰ Will Willimon, *Leading with the Sermon* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020).

¹¹ Reeb, *Say Something!* xiv.

Summary

What if there are effective habits for homiletical self-assessment? Perhaps there are things that pastor-preachers need to pay attention to in order to make preaching more vital for hearers. So how does a preacher know when they've thrown a touchdown pass? In the pages that follow, this researcher will offer strategies and tools for faithful preaching and ideas for becoming a more reflective preacher. A pastor's preaching provides a way for pastors to reach the greatest number of people during a given week. Their sermons can be life-giving to hearers, especially those hanging on by a thread to life and/or a relationship with God. What could be more important than taking a look at how our proclamations could be enhanced?

CHAPTER 2

REMINDERS BEFORE AND AFTER PREACHING

Introduction

This thesis on developing “Effective Habits for Homiletical Self-Assessment” asserts that preaching is a life-long learning project. There is always more to learn from other writers and preachers as we engage in the preaching task. As reflective preachers, we have the opportunity to consider the homiletical, theological and biblical foundations relied upon for the writing of sermons. We can learn to ask questions about how we incorporated our theology of preaching and our theological beliefs? In addition, were prayer and self-care a part of our process? Did we feel authentic as we preached? This thesis chapter will present an overview of key themes for the preacher to consider in reflecting on their sermons.

Preaching Begins with the Preacher’s Own Prayers

It is essential that the pastor carve out time with God, a time to notice God’s nature, God’s world, and God’s workings. “Prayer is where you find out first, who God is, who you are second, and last, what God wants you to say.”¹ The reflective preacher might ask themselves if personal spiritual disciplines such as prayer walks, journalistic prayers, devotions, pre-event prayer time, or prayer teams were part of their process, or if

¹ Ron Boyd-MacMillan, *Explosive Preaching: Letters on Detonating the Gospel in the 21st Century* (Waynesboro: Paternoster Press, 2006), 229.

they would like them to be in the future. Preachers might consider writing a prayer to God that reflects their desire to grow as a preacher, letting God know specific areas in which they wish to grow.

Personal Care and Development

Before the preacher begins to prepare a sermon, they would do well to do some reflection. Have they considered reading every couple of months? Beyond that, have they read broadly? They might peruse the number one best-selling book in America year to year, asking themselves the question, why is this book so appealing to people? It may offer preaching insights into the people in their congregation.

Dr. Lori Carrell, is Chancellor for Academic Affairs at the University of Minnesota, Rochester. She focuses on transformative communication, learning innovation and well-being in higher education communities. She recommends the preacher ask themselves where they would not go or where they haven't been—literally or metaphorically—in order to grow. Deepening activities can include:

- a) Unaddressed personal or relational issues
- b) Spiritual disciplines
- c) New avenues of service outside one's professional role
- d) Pursuit of relationships with challenging or diverse others
- e) Commitment to close friendships
- f) Expansion of reading.²

² Lori J. Carrell, *Preaching That Matters: Reflective Practices for Transforming Sermons* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2013), 117.

Preachers cannot overestimate the value of sleep, a hobby, exercise, and devotional and decompression time. Pastors might try sleeping eight hours a night for seven days in a row and see what happens. Everyone can benefit by scheduling a hobby or favorite activity once every two weeks. If a person doesn't exercise, one could begin with an exercise four times a week for 30 minutes.

Authenticity

The reflective preacher considers the critical topic of authenticity. It is so important that every preacher is the authentic person God has created them to be. “God wants to incarnate Christ through each preacher’s authentic voice. Christ reveals himself to the world through the distinct voices of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And he wants to come to listeners through your authentic voice.”³

There is a story about a mom who framed a crayon picture of a dragon that was pink, purple, and lavender. A friend asks her if it has special meaning. The mom tells her that her daughter drew it when she was in kindergarten and her teacher told her she'd done it all wrong, saying everyone knows that dragons are not that color! The mom hung the picture to remind her daughter and her to paint their dragons any color and to be their own unique selves in the world.

When preachers are their authentic selves, they are more likely to connect with hearers. Parishioners are more likely to think, “If you know me, if you are one of us, I'll listen to what you have to say.” The movie *Erin Brockovich*⁴ does much the same

³ Lenny Luchetti, *Preaching Essentials: A Practical Guide* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2012), 159.

⁴ *Erin Brockovich*, written by Susannah Grant and directed by Steven Soderbergh (Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2000).

thing. It's the story of people dying because of a town's contaminated water. Julia Roberts plays a mom who is not an attorney but just an ordinary person like the people who are impacted by her interaction with them. Those persons are willing to tell her their stories and take her advice because she is one of them. So it is with preaching. It is the conviction of this thesis writer that this is true with a pastor-preacher: be your authentic self in performing your sermon.

Liking your audience members is the first step in being genuine with them. Nancy Duarte, writer, speaker, and CEO suggests the following. Study them. "What would a walk in their shoes be like? What keeps them up at night? What are they called to do that will make a difference on this earth . . . Your goal is to figure out what your audience cares about and link it to your idea."⁵ Here are questions that can help preachers get to know and like their people.

- Lifestyle: What's likable and special about them? What does a walk in their shoes look like? Where do they hang out? What's their lifestyle like?
- Knowledge: What do they already know about what you will say? From what sources do they get their knowledge? What biases do they have (good or bad)?
- Motivation and Desire: What do they need or desire? What is lacking in their lives? What gets them out of bed and turns their crank?
- Values: What's important to them? How do they spend their time and money? What are their priorities? What unites them or incites them?

⁵ Nancy Duarte, *Resonate: Present Visual Stories that Transform Audiences* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010), 64.

- Influence: Who or what influences their behavior? What experiences have influenced their thoughts? How do they make decisions?
- Respect: How do they give and receive respect? What can you do to make them feel respected?⁶

Pastor-preachers can love their congregation through choices they make about the sermon focus and language choices. Let's say you want to address the concern James has for his listeners. James hopes his listeners will turn away from envy. With the goal of loving the congregation, we might focus on what God is calling us toward instead of away from. How might we practice gratitude, serve others, advocate for others, or give? Each of these actions moves us away from envy, even if we do not mention it in the sermon.

Getting Out of the Way

There is nothing more distracting than a preacher in a pulpit who thinks it is all about them. Preachers can become the elephants in the room when we take up too much space and lose sight of the reason we are there in the first place. Humility is a virtue and a virtue that serves the preacher well in proclaiming Christ. The reflective preacher might ask themselves if they have kept their ego in check.

Theologian Karl Barth says, "The pastor might easily become the pope of his congregation, presenting his own idea instead of God's Word."⁷ Leander Keck, Emeritus Professor of Biblical Theology at Yale Divinity School, suggests that preachers can lose

⁶ Duarte, *Resonate* 65.

⁷ Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (Lewisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 50.

their proper focus. A preacher can be tempted to leave the Gospel out. Preachers must take care not to proclaim themselves instead of the Word of God.

The pulpit should not be our confessional. Leander Keck demonstrated how one can speak effectively about one's own weakness in his sermon on Mark 6:30-44. He said, "I recall preaching a sermon so weak that I wished I could have sneaked out the back way. But at the door, a person who seldom commented made it a point to say my sermon had been helpful. To this day I can't see what it could have been that helped her, but one of my little loaves was blessed and she was fed."⁸

Keck whittled himself down to the right size and saved himself from being the hero of this story with the phrases "so weak" and "can't see what" and "little loaves." In Keck's example, the focus was on God's provision rather than on the preacher's power.⁹ One of the ironies of public speaking is that the less seriously we preachers take ourselves (within reason), the more seriously the congregation may take our message.

The people to whom we preach are measuring our level of egotism. If they sniff out pride in us, it will diminish their level of receptivity to the message we proclaim. Self-deprecating humor, done naturally, wisely, and sparingly, gives the impression that we preachers see ourselves not as one *above* the people but as one *among* the people of God.¹⁰

The Promise of God's Spirit

What this researcher has learned and hopefully what preachers experience is that the Holy Spirit speaks to people through our sermons. After all, the Holy Spirit can use both our meaty and meager offerings to energize congregations to follow Christ. When a pastor-preacher feels like their sermon is mediocre or when time did not permit the level

⁸ Leander E. Keck, "Limited Resources, Unlimited Possibilities," quoted in Eugene L. Lowry, *How to Preach a Parable* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 87.

⁹ Willobe, *The Write Stuff* 82.

¹⁰ Luchetti, *Preaching Essentials* 208.

of quality to which the preacher normally aspires, God can and will use it for good. God has promised to abide in the Word and speak to listeners and preachers alike. Upon reflection, we just might be surprised by hearer's responses, perhaps in the same way the Samaritan woman in John 4 ran from the well to the city and was no doubt surprised that her brief words were met with such a far-reaching evangelistic response.¹¹

Challenging Dominant Culture

The Apostle Paul said in Romans 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."¹² Preachers need to recognize ways in which their lives and their language are influenced by the current culture so they can by the power of the Holy Spirit envision counter-cultural ways God invites us to live and move and have our being.

Old Testament scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann once said:

The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us . . . The alternative consciousness to be nurtured, on the one hand, serves to criticize in dismantling the dominant consciousness . . . On the other hand, that alternative consciousness to be nurtured serves to energize persons and communities by its promise of another time and situation toward which the community of faith may move.¹³

The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was just 26-years-old when he became a new preacher and the leader of a movement for social justice. What a gift he had to speak to both

¹¹ Karoline Lewis, *John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 67.

¹² Romans 12:2, New Revised Standard Version Bible 1989.

¹³ Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2015), 11.

whites and blacks and to inspire a new generation of people who would make a difference for all people. He once said: “Most people are thermometers that record or register the temperature of majority opinion, not thermostats that transform and regulate the temperature of society.” When we serve as thermostats instead of thermometers we join God in what God is doing in the world and it enables us to be part of the transformation of society. Audre Lorde said: “For it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.”¹⁴

As preachers we need to take responsibility and care in not marginalizing people or continuing stereotypes of who is important to society and who is potentially harmful to the social well-being, for instance, the urban predator and the suburban victim. In *Do No Harm*, author Stephen Ray writes:

I have found it useful to ask two sets of questions when I approach not only the writings of other theologians, but also my own constructive work as a theologian. First I ask: What are the seemingly common-sense images that are being used in this construction? What types of figures are being deployed? What seemingly innocuous depictions of persons are at work? Having identified these figures, I then ask a second, even more important set of questions: What kind of social power relations undergird these images? What do these cultural images mean in their context with respect to social relations? This means asking further: Are they oppressively gendered, racist, classist, homophobic, heterosexist, or anti-Semitic? It involves asking, in short, are oppressive social dynamics being played out in these images.¹⁵

Matthew Skinner, Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, writes that preachers must be vigilant in noticing how they pursue and safeguard their own convictions and those of their flock.

The antidote to idolatry is not to avoid being religious. Violence and self-assurance are hardly limited to religious people. It is not to withhold passion or

¹⁴ McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation* 80.

¹⁵ Stephen Ray, *Do No Harm* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003), 41.

conviction from our beliefs, nor to distrust all we think we know or can know about God. The answer involves keeping in view the object of our convictions—the possibility of encountering God. It likewise involves vigilantly noticing how our pursuing and safeguarding of these convictions leads us to deal with differences and dissent. If our convictions leave broken bodies in their wake, or if our pursuits of our religious values and prerogatives snuff out people’s vitality in other ways, then we’re almost certainly doing something wrong.¹⁶

A critical task of the preacher is to ensure that they are not perpetuating negative stereotypes or unwittingly promoting oppressive social stigmas they do not intend to profess. As Ray suggests, the preacher has an opportunity to notice the meaning of cultural images in their context with respect to social relations and make changes that ultimately do no harm. Ultimately the preacher’s job must be to do good, generating fresh perspectives and greater vision about a shared humanity.

Biblical Preaching

Preaching with a God Focus

Most people in our congregations believe in a god that does not exist,¹⁷ a god who gives a person a happy life and helps them feel good about themselves. God is present when there is a problem and when they need to go to heaven. When we preach the “real” God of Scripture in all God’s complexity, we help listeners weather the storms of their lives. They will not be likely to abandon church when they experience hard times. We preachers help them recognize God is present with them even in times of struggle or loss. Presenting the “real” God prevents people from mistaking the true God from false gods.

¹⁶ Matthew L. Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel: Encountering the Divine in the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, Baker Publishing Group, 2015), 49.

¹⁷ Hulst, *A Little Handbook for Preachers* 37.

Here is an example of a sermon outline, based on the call of Abram in Gen. 12, without a God focus:

- 1) God calls his people.
- 2) Calling relies on your gifts and stretches your abilities.
- 3) You are where you are for a reason.
- 4) You need to work hard at your calling.

Here is the same outline with a God focus:

- 1) God can call anyone at any time. God can call you at any time.
- 2) God's call stretches Abram. God's call will stretch you.
- 3) God's call on Abram has the big picture in mind. God's call on your life has the big picture in mind.¹⁸

An outline with a God focus can help prevent our sermon from forgetting God is the reason we are preaching. A God-focused outline can be generated from key questions such as: What hopeful action is God performing? What does it tell us about who God is? This researcher remembers Billy Graham once saying, "People do not come to hear what I have to say; they come to hear what God has to say."

The preacher is urged to keep in mind, as they assess the sermon, the wise counsel of Karl Barth. This well-known theologian offers this definition for the preached sermon: the attempt to say who and what Jesus Christ is. Barth calls preachers signposts, pointers, agents of God. Preaching cannot set out to prove God. God will present what God wants to present. The preacher should anticipate what God desires to share. He warns against

¹⁸ Hulst, 25.

preachers who are constantly proclaiming human sins instead of God's goodness. Christian preaching speaks to forgiven sin and must be the unconditional preaching of hope. Preaching takes place in the midst of two sacraments—the sacrament of grace and the sacrament of hope. In light of this statement, Barth goes on to say: “Preaching to the church is guaranteed . . . when its poles, its sacramental character and its conformity to scripture, are secure.”¹⁹ With regard to their congregations, the preacher must love the people and know their realities. The congregation will tell the pastor-preacher what is on their hearts. With this knowledge and with purposed intent, the sermon will address their present lives.

When preachers are new to the preaching task, they may have a lot of class and reading notes accumulated to use at the start of their preaching ministry. But gradually a time of drought may come. This can be a time when our God focus is refined and intensify our reliance on scripture. Barth asserts, “Our own inspiration by which we swear in the beginning will leave us in the lurch sooner or later. Then the exposition of scripture must replace it. This alone will endure.”²⁰ This is a reminder to let go of personal opinions and desires and hear what the Word says and not just what the preacher would like to share. Barth suggests that what is in the text must be the sermon content. Saint Augustine suggests that if a person falsely interprets scripture, “he is deceived in the same way as a person who leaves a road by mistake but passes through a field to the same place toward which the road itself leads.”²¹ One must approach scripture with hope,

¹⁹ Barth, *Homiletics* 62-63.

²⁰ Barth, 92.

²¹ D.W. Robertson, Jr., translator, *On Christian Doctrine by Saint Augustine* (Pickerington: Beloved Publishing, 2014), 31.

faith, and love. If scripture is not used to focus on God, our love of God and our neighbor, scripture is not understood at all.

Regarding the ambiguities in scripture, the preacher must examine context and what all of scripture has to say about the possible meanings the text might conjure up. When multiple meanings are found, consider it very possible that a generous God may have provided for a variety of understandings or awakenings. The most important thing to do when encountering any scripture is to pray for understanding.

Now what if the Bible would be preached without gender binary assumptions? What if we would pay keen attention (as in our sermon assessment) to who might be marginalized and discriminated against through the way we interpret and apply biblical meaning? And what if we talked about how the Bible has been misinterpreted?

One of the things this researcher appreciates about our ELCA theology is that we look at what all of scripture has to say about a particular verse of the Bible. Two years ago, the researcher's congregation participated in a sermon series on a book by Adam Hamilton, senior pastor of the 22,000-member United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas. The book is entitled, *Half Truths—God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn't Say*.²² The congregation explored common phrases: everything happens for a reason; God won't give you more than you can handle; God said it, I believe it that settles it; Love the sinner, hate the sin. People were invited to consider challenging the things they'd heard, things they'd always known, things they'd been taught that may not be the whole truth. Even irregular

²² Adam Hamilton, *Half Truths—God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn't Say* (Nashville: Abington Press, 2016).

worshippers flocked to church for this sermon series. It obviously met a need and spoke to people in their contexts.

Augustine warns against taking figurative expressions literally. He writes: “There is a miserable servitude of the spirit in this habit....so that one is not able to raise the eye of the mind above things that are corporal and created to drink in eternal light.”²³

Students of the Bible need to take care in interpreting what they find in scripture.

It would behoove us, then to be careful of the beam in our own eye even as we attempt to remove the speck from the eye of Scripture. . . . Another reason for not being overzealous in separating the wheat from the weeds in Scripture has to do with the fact that God typically sows the wheat among the weeds, precisely there, a divine intrusion into enemy territory.²⁴

It’s important to ask ourselves if we have been preaching from all the various genres and sections of the Bible or just the passages with which we are most comfortable or the ones about which we want to preach. Working from a one- or two-year preaching plan can provide a well-balanced blend of the biblical narrative, the Christian calendar, important doctrines, and topics that are pertinent in your context. It’s important to notice what our go-to position is or favorite texts are that reflect our own theological stereotype. “Every preacher has his or her own personalized kerygma. Every congregation does too, and so does every person inside or outside the church.”²⁵ Consider what might be your congregation’s stereotype.

Sermons are not Christian speeches or self-help talks. The difference between Christian preachers and those simply giving spiritual advice is that we preachers root our

²³ Robertson, *On Christian Doctrine* by Saint Augustine 84.

²⁴ Charles R. Bartow, *God’s Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 42.

²⁵ Bartow, 47.

words in Scripture. We love the story that changes lives. That's the difference. We actually believe this story changes lives. We've seen it happen. Marriages are restored, alcoholics get sober and stingy people become generous—all because of the gospel.²⁶

Theological Questions

Lenny Luchetti, Professor of Proclamation at Wesley Seminary of Indiana Wesleyan University, Marion, Indiana, recommends six theological questions that impact preaching.²⁷ What does the overall story of the Bible reveal about the nature of God? How does this sermon faithfully reflect what the biblical story overall reveals about God? What does God seem to be saying and doing in and through this particular biblical text? How does the purpose of the sermon align with the purposes of God manifest in this text? What does the sermon say about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit that is true, insightful, and compelling? Does the sermon present the gospel by both honestly assessing the problem of human sin and hopefully proclaiming the resolution of divine grace? The reflective preacher should ask themselves if their preached words are in keeping with their intended theology.

Telling the Truth

Can we preachers handle the truth? In his book *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*, Frederick Buechner wrote:

The preacher is apt to preach the Gospel with the high magic taken out, the deep mystery reduced to a manageable size . . . The wild and joyful promise of the Gospel is reduced to promises more easily kept. The peace that passeth all

²⁶ Hulst, *A Little Handbook for Preachers* 27.

²⁷ Lenny Luchetti, *Preaching Essentials: A Practical Guide* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2012), 28-29.

understanding is reduced to peace that anybody can understand. The faith that can move mountains and raise the dead becomes faith that can help make life bearable until death ends it. Eternal life becomes a metaphor for the way the good a man does lives after him . . . We are born from Missouri. But we are also from somewhere else. We are from Oz, from Looking-Glass land, from Narnia, and from Middle Earth. No matter how forgotten and neglected, there is a child in all of us who is not just willing to believe in the possibility that maybe fairy tales are true after all but who is to some degree in touch with that truth.²⁸

He goes on to write:

Scientists speak of intelligent life among the stars, of how at the speed of light there is no time, of consciousness as more than just an epiphenomenon of the physical brain. Doctors speak seriously about life after death, and not just the mystics anymore but the housewife, the stockbroker, the high-school senior speak about an inner world where reality becomes transparent to a reality realer still. The joke of it is that often it is the preacher who as steward of the wildest mystery of them all is the one who hangs back, prudent, cautious, hopelessly mature and wise to the last when no less than Saint Paul tell him to be a fool for Christ's sake, no less than Christ tells him to be a child for his own and the kingdom's sake. Let the preacher tell the truth.²⁹

Summary

Our preaching is a way of telling the truth about who God is, who we are, and why it matters. It is a preacher's opportunity to release the Gospel to people who are hungry for honesty as well as hope.

If a preacher risks using their five loaves to feed the crowd, it will be blessed.

“Generation after generation has been fed by weak disciples serving their own five loaves with Christ's blessing. This is the real apostolic succession, and now it's our turn. You give them something to eat.”³⁰

²⁸ Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York: HarperCollins, 1977), 96-97.

²⁹ Buechner, 97-96.

³⁰ Leander E. Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit; The Renewal of Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 168.

Developing effective habits for homiletical self-reflection is key in enhancing the craft that is life-giving to our listeners. Taking into account the preacher's theological convictions, homiletical choices, and Biblical focus will ultimately enhance how listeners hear the claims in scripture and increase their desire and ability to live out their lives of discipleship.

CHAPTER 3

THE SERMON INTRODUCTION

The sermon introduction is critical if listeners are going to tune in to the rest of the sermon. The introduction may even be the most critical part of the sermon. This is why this researcher has dedicated an entire chapter to the sermon introduction. A preacher would do well to invest time and energy in preparing sermon introductions.

Listeners need to be reeled in. It is no fault of their own that they are distracted by their own thoughts and the people in the pews next to them. The first lines of the sermon need to engage them or it is possible they will completely miss what the preacher has worked so hard to prepare. Variety is one key to engagement and so are the following techniques.

Posing a Question as Bait

A question like, “If God is so good, why do bad things happen?” draws sermon listeners in and keeps them listening for a resolution. Jesus did this. He would say, “Which of you having ninety-nine sheep would not go in search of the one who is lost?” (Luke 15:5). Or “Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15). Or “Which of these was the neighbor?” (Luke 10:36).

Benjamin E. Mays, American Baptist minister and civil rights leader, employed this question in his Thanksgiving sermon on Matthew 25:31-46: “We are justified in

raising the following question with hope, faith, skepticism, and pessimism, ‘What have we to be thankful for?’” Mays saved his question from being trite and sentimental by naming a sequence of contradictory feelings and ending with the strongest negative one (pessimism). The conflict between the expected seasonal virtue of gratitude and the named feelings, creates an interesting tension. We want to know how Mays will resolve it.¹

Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest, professor, author, and theologian, has a gift for posing intriguing questions that engage listeners. In a sermon on doubting Thomas, she asks why Jesus would identify himself by his hands and feet. She writes:

One of the most peculiar things about Luke’s resurrection story is the way Jesus identifies himself to his friends. “Look at my hands and my feet,” he says to his frightened, doubtful disciples. They are shaking in their sandals. They are wondering if they are having a group hallucination when he offers them some sure proofs that he is who they think he is: two hands and two feet, ten fingers and ten toes, which could belong to anyone else but him. It is the wounds he wants them to see, but isn’t it a peculiar way to identify himself? Why not say, “Listen to my voice” or, “look at my face?” Could you identify someone by hands and feet alone? I can see it now: FBI posters at the post office with hands and feet on them instead of faces. Hands and feet are simply not the first things we notice about one another, and yet they are so telling of who we are . . .²

In another sermon, Taylor describes the genocide in the book of Joshua and then writes: “So Joshua defeated the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings; he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel

¹ Willobe, *The Write Stuff* 20.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999), 119.

commanded. Is this really the Word of the Lord?’³ She asks the question that should be on every listener’s mind.

Taylor’s sermon on Amos 8:4-12 in which God will send a famine of God’s word to the people begins with this sentence, “I polled a lot of people this week, and the prophet Amos is no one’s idea of a good time.” She describes a bit of his sermonizing and then asks, “Why is Amos in such a bad mood?”⁴ In some ways, it’s a bit humorous and yet it sets the scene for the listener. This and the quotes above show how Barbara Brown Taylor dangles the bait in front of the listener to attract and to perhaps “hook” the listener into “the net” of the sermon.

Luring Listeners with a Character

Dramatizing the scene and imagining the character’s thoughts, moves, and emotions, is a preaching lure. Paul Scott Wilson, Professor of Homiletics at Emmanuel College of the University of Toronto, sketches the character of Mary in a sermon on John 12:1-8.

Mary walked around the edge of her dining room. Martha was busy in the kitchen. Their brother Lazarus was here, reclining, eating with the guests, their legs radiating from the table like rays of the sun. At last, sure there was enough of everything, Mary paused to study the faces in the candlelight. She really had no plan when she bought the nard (cut to scene of her in the market in Jerusalem). But now, with Jesus actually present in her house, her gown brushing his feet each time she brought in food and drink, she realized how near his death might be. Her Jesus was dying. She would have done anything to save him.⁵

³ Taylor, 175.

⁴ Taylor, 180.

⁵ Paul Scott Wilson, *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler*, edited by Ronald J. Allen (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 82-83.

Listeners are brought right into the room where this took place. They grow in their understanding of Mary as a real person and are lured into the sermon by this engaging description in the home in Bethany.

Barbara Brown Taylor sketched Job in her sermon, “Out of the Whirlwind.” “But once Job climbs on his dung heap and starts cursing the day he was born, it is hard not to empathize. Everyone has been there, at one time or another, or at least knows someone who has.”⁶

Sketching the scene of the biblical text with dramatic images has a way of luring the hearer into becoming involved in the sermon.

Beginning with an Image

Familiar images can serve as a means by which the full attention of worshippers is focused at the outset. Bible stories are full of images like lost coins, lamps, lilies, nets and seed.

Barbara Lundblad, retired Professor of Preaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York, uses a photograph as a sermon image that sets the stage for listeners to see themselves in a story from Luke’s Gospel. She begins by describing treasure in a cupboard at her parent’s house—old 8mm movies recording family history, pictures that capture what a photograph cannot. Then she moves on to describe the treasure in a photograph that doesn’t move.

A photograph stands still long enough for memory to fill in the story, to fix the date, to bring buried feelings back to the surface. If you wanted to tell today’s gospel story, would you tell it as a movie or in still photographs? Let me ask the question another way: When you heard this

⁶ Taylor, Home By Another Way 162.

gospel story read, were you most aware of moving or standing still? Do you remember *walking* on the road or *sitting* at the table?⁷

Listeners might be stirred to remember their own treasures as well as picture themselves on the road or at the table.

Three hands clapping is the image in a sermon for a Trinity Sunday.

Barbara Brown Taylor begins by talking about the koans Zen teachers would give their students to aid them in their spiritual awakenings.

When a koan does its work, the result is more an experience than an understanding. Those on the receiving end say they discover a level of reality that lies far beyond reason. One famous Zen koan is: What was the appearance of your face before your parents were born? Another is: What is the sound of one hand clapping?⁸

Frederick Buechner, American writer, preacher, and theologian, uses the rainbow image to describe what it was like for the disciples to be recruited by Jesus.

Somebody appears on your front stoop speaking your name, say, and you go down to open the door to see what's up. Sometimes while it's still raining, the sun comes out from behind the clouds, and suddenly, arching against the gray sky, there is a rainbow, which people stop doing whatever they're doing to look at. They lay down their fishing nets, their tax forms, their bridge hands, their golf clubs, their newspapers to gaze at the sky because what is happening up there is so marvelous they can't help themselves. Something like that, I think, is the way those twelve men Matthew names were called to become a church, plus Mary, Martha, Joanna, and all the other women and men . . . He didn't so much call them out of their ordinary lives as he called them out of believing that ordinary life is ordinary.⁹

⁷ Barbara K. Lundblad, *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler*, edited by Ronald J. Allen (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 106.

⁸ Taylor, *Home by Another Way* 151.

⁹ Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark: A Life of Sermons* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 148.

Preachers who follow Buechner's lead by conjuring up the right image will cause listeners to drop their nets full of agitating ideas flopping around, pause and hear what God has to say to them.

Stirring Conflict

Buechner started a sermon on Mark 9:14-31 with the following conflict.

In this passage from Mark there are really two texts . . . that stand in the most violent sort of contrast with one another, a contrast that seems ironic even to the point of blasphemy. And the realities to which the two texts point are equally at odds, and the contrast between them is just as violent and ironic. Because the first text deals with the power of God and the second one deals with the power of man, and the printed page is almost torn in two by having to bear them both, just as this world is almost torn in two, just as you and I as individuals are almost torn in two, by having to contain them both. This is the great power struggle of our age and of all ages—not East against West, Communism against Democracy, White against Black, but this struggle: “man’s power against God’s power, man against God and God against man.”¹⁰

Naming opposites along with realities addresses listeners’ contexts and all but begs their attention.

Building Anticipation

Frederick Buechner preaches on John 1:1-16 in a unique way. I certainly have never heard it preached this way. He begins by talking about the two voices that can be heard in John 1.

The first of them is a voice chanting, a cantor’s voice, a muezzin’s voice, a poet’s voice, a choir-boy’s voice before it has changed—ghostly, virginal, remote, and cool as stone. The second voice is insistent and over earnest, a little nasal. It is a voice that wants to make sure, a voice that’s trying hard to get everything straight. It is above all a down-to-earth voice. It keeps interrupting.¹¹

¹⁰ Willobee, *The Write Stuff* 16.

¹¹ Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark* 115.

Let preachers everywhere be inspired to push the edge on creativity for the high purpose of our calling.

Jump in the Middle

“They threw me off a hay truck about noon.”¹² This opening sentence in James Cain’s novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* illustrates another kind of hook. The listener jumps right into the action.

Starting with a Movie

In a sermon on Matthew 15:1-20 (about Jesus’ intense dialog with the Pharisees and scribes about wrestling with the tradition of the elders) Alyce McKenzie, Professor of Preaching at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, cites the movie *As Good As It Gets*. In the film Jack Nicholson plays an obsessive-compulsive author named Melvin Udall. She describes his idiosyncrasies, and then says,

Oh, and there’s one other pastime for the busy Mr. Udall: his daily hand washing ritual. He opens his medicine chest, and there are row upon row of gleaming amber bars of antiseptic soap wrapped in cellophane, never before touched by human hands. . . . He swipes each bar only once across his palms before discarding it and unwrapping another. Jesus reminds the Mr. Udall in us all that it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.¹³

Even if a listener has not seen the movie, they can easily be drawn into the sermon from the start through McKenzie’s descriptive sermon introduction.

¹² James M. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (New York: Grossett & Dunlap, 1934), 3.

¹³ Alyce McKenzie, *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler*, edited by Ronald J. Allen (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 74-75.

Using a Popular Phrase

“Just say no!”¹⁴ This phrase begins a sermon entitled: God’s “No and Ours” on Esther by Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, Professor of Homiletics at Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut. She speaks first about the need to say no to drugs and next about Esther’s need to say no to the King. Finding a contextual parallel for the scripture can be effective both for eagerly hearing as well as remembering a sermon.

Shared Experiences

Shared experiences and everyday frustrations are sure to open ears. Being teased in school, sitting in traffic, or finding yourself excluded from a group are common human experiences that elicit emotions and memories helpful in hearing meaning in scripture. Whatever excites the preacher or frustrates them in the text is a key to a good hook, lure, or the bait the preacher needs to engage their listeners. Beginning with bait can hook the listener ensuring they are with the preacher on the sermon journey.

Summary

Preachers will benefit from reviewing how they begin their sermons. Are they varying their methods so listeners sense they are hearing something new? Is the preacher using an introduction that sets the tone for the intended preaching outcome? How have previous introductions enhanced or been detrimental to the overall sermon direction? Asking these questions can improve future sermon introductions and heighten their importance.

¹⁴ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler*, edited by Ronald J. Allen (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 201.

CHAPTER 4

REVISITING SERMON STRATEGY

The reflective preacher practices habits that lead to the delivery of a clear homiletical message. Contextual and empathy choices, use of stories and contrast, effective transitions, word choices and linguistic tools, sermon formulas, and good endings are all secret sauce for a faithful and engaging proclamation event.

A Clear Message

The most common problem with sermons mentioned by parishioners and by authors of books and articles on preaching is a lack of clarity. Sermons are all over the map without a clear message. It is important for preachers to ask themselves if they can articulate the main thrust of their sermon in one simple sentence. If they cannot, the congregation probably cannot either.

O. Wesley Allen Jr., Professor of Homiletics at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, writes about unity as an essential quality of sermonic form.

We have all heard (and perhaps have at times been) preachers who preach a sermon that in truth contains two or three sermons within it or sermons that spend more time on side trips than on the primary homiletical journey planned for the day. Phrases like, “Back to what I was saying,” “Let’s return to . . .,” or, worse, “Where was I?” betray a lack of focus on the part of the preacher. Jumping from biblical text to biblical text, shifting from doctrine to doctrine, or wandering from issue to issue demonstrates a preacher’s lack of preparation or, at least, clarity. From the congregation’s side, such lack of focus in the sermon results in split

attention. Some hearers may never return from a tangent to the main line of thought. Others may experience a disconnect when they are involved in the main claim of the sermon and then are asked to make a sharp turn toward an only loosely related idea. Or some may simply get lost in the sermon, stay confused, and let their mind wander to anything other than the good news of Jesus Christ.¹

When Charlie Reeb is preparing a sermon, his goal is to express his message in one sentence that is clear, compelling, and memorable.

By clear I mean direct and succinct. The fewer words the better. It needs to be immediately understood and repeatable. By compelling I mean it needs to answer so what? Why should a listener care? A compelling message is one that expresses why: why the message is important to you and why it should be important to those listening. It is something you feel a great burden to share. By memorable I mean when your listeners are hanging out with friends on Sunday afternoon and one of them asks, “What was the sermon about?” they can rattle off the message with ease.²

People who write plays, movies, and novels use what is called “a through line” which is a connecting theme that ties together each narrative element.³ Every sermon should have one.

The core focus of your message should be simple and explain your entire piece as if you were pitching a movie. When the movie *Speed* was pitched, it was pitched as *Die Hard* on a bus, while *Alien* was pitched as *Jaws* on a spaceship.⁴ The listener knows right away what the message will be about.

Filtering your content is critical. If you don’t reduce what is extraneous, listeners will respond negatively because they have to work too hard to discern what’s important. Make edits on behalf of your listeners. They will appreciate the preacher’s kindness in

¹ O. Wesley Allen Jr., *Determining the Form* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 7-8.

² Reeb, *Say Something!* 3.

³ Chip Heath & Dan Heath, *Made to Stick* (Troy: BusinessNews Publishers, 2013), 30.

⁴ Heath & Heath, 12.

giving them more salient content. “Keep a stranglehold on the one big idea you need to convey and be relentless about building content that supports that one idea.”⁵

People are moved by why you think your message is important. “Sharing your ‘why’ is the secret sauce of good preaching because a convicted preacher is a compelling preacher. . . . People want you to speak from your heart to their heart. When you get in touch with that, you will find the sweet spot of preaching.”⁶ The right personal stories can be teased out of our memory by thinking about significant people in our life. Picture places you’ve been like playgrounds, high school, doctor’s offices, holy sites, and so forth. What have you owned, collected, or treasured? How about events and milestones? These memories will prompt you to stories you can use either to bring a sermon to life or use to proclaim a sermon that is alive.

Reeb suggests you will know if your sermon is successful when:

- 1) Your listeners remember your message.
- 2) Your listeners go home and read the Bible.
- 3) Your listeners act on the message.
- 4) Your listeners make a profession of faith in Christ.
- 5) Your listeners want to join the church.⁷

Determining a sermon focus and function can be daunting. Anne Lamott, American novelist, political activist, public speaker and writing teacher, recommends the following to writers:

⁵ Duarte, 122.

⁶ Reeb, *Say Something!* 52

⁷ Reeb, 73-75.

You don't care about those first three pages; those you will throw out, those you needed to write to get to that fourth page, to get to that one long paragraph that was what you had in mind when you started, only you didn't know that, couldn't know that, until you got to it. You are learning what you *aren't* writing, and this is helping you find out what you are writing.⁸

This is our goal as writers I think; to help others have this sense of....wonder, of seeing things anew, things that can catch us off guard, that break in on our small, bordered worlds.⁹ Speaker Tierney Thys puts it this way:

Like all good movies or books, a great talk is transporting. We love to go on adventures, travel someplace new with an informed, if not quirky, guide who can introduce us to things we never knew existed, incite us to crawl out windows into strange worlds, outfit us with new lenses to see the ordinary in an extraordinary way . . . enrapture us and engage multiple parts of our brains simultaneously. So I often try to fashion my talks around embarking on a journey.¹⁰

Write about freedoms worth fighting for. Lamott writes: "We write to expose the unexposed. If there is one door in the castle you have been told not to go through....most humans want to keep that door shut. But the writer's job is to see what's behind it."¹¹

What are ways preachers can help their hearers look, without fear, through doors they would prefer stay shut? What a privilege preachers have to help people navigate life.

We are given a shot at dancing with, or at least clapping along with, the absurdity of life, instead of being squashed by it over and over again. It's like singing in a boat during a terrible storm at sea. You can't stop the raging storm, but singing can change the hearts and spirits of the people who are together on that ship.¹²

⁸ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Anchor Books of Random House, Inc., 1994), 9.

⁹ Lamott, 100.

¹⁰ Anderson, *Ted Talks* 20.

¹¹ Lamott, *Bird by Bird* 198.

¹² Lamott, 237.

Jana Childers, Professor of Homiletics and Speech-Communication at San

Francisco Theological Seminary, writes:

What is it that makes a sermon work, fly, come to life, have zing, take wing, tear the place up? What gets a sermon up off the page, across the tops of the pews and down into people's insides? What gives the preaching trans-conscious appeal—the kind of impact that affects not just cerebrum but cerebellum too?¹³

“Art that deserves to be called art ‘does not teach, it reveals.’”¹⁴ A focus and function for our sermons can reveal what is concealed, forgotten, or suppressed. When we preach, we teach people how to spot God. Every sermon is another lesson in how we can see God, hear God and know God.

We are the leaders of the tour, wearing the large pair of binoculars around our necks, telling the group to look over here or up there, or asking them to stay quiet so we can listen carefully for the still, small voice...Reading the story of Achan may teach us how God responds to disobedience. Preaching on the annunciation may reveal how God can interrupt any life. Studying the Genesis story of Joseph teaches God's sovereignty even in seasons of waiting. Each story in Scripture teaches us how to spot God.¹⁵

Pastor-preachers are teaching listeners how to spot God in their own perusing of scripture passages.

¹³ Jana Childers, *Performing the Word: Preaching as Theatre* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 19.

¹⁴ Childers, 39.

¹⁵ Hulst, *A Little Handbook for Preachers* 34-35.

Contextual Preaching

Types of Listeners

There are a variety of people listening. The reflective preacher will remember that some people listen with their mind, others with their heart, some with their soul, and others with their strength.

- Some “mind” listeners want the sermon to inform them about what the Bible says. They want to know about the meaning of words and the historical background of what the preacher is sharing. These listeners are looking for a logical sermon outline with clear points. They will probably like sermon titles like “Three Sources of Conflict in the Corinthian Church” or “Principles of Love According to Ecclesiastes 4:9-12.”¹⁶
- “Heart” listeners are looking for inspiration and motivation. They are seeking sermons that comfort, give their life meaning, and/or provide absolution. “God Comforts the Brokenhearted” or “You Matter to God”¹⁷ would be titles that appeal to this group.
- Now the “soul” listeners are people who listen to the sermon for theological reflection. They want to understand the nature and purposes of God. Sermon titles that might appeal to them are “Why Is There Pain in a World that a Loving God Created?” or “Who Is Jesus?”¹⁸

¹⁶ Luchetti, *Preaching Essentials* 64.

¹⁷ Luchetti, 64.

¹⁸ Luchetti, 65.

- Listeners who want a sermon to tell them what they can *do* are the “strength” listeners. They are doers who want a practical life-application. “How to Develop a Christian Marriage” or “Five Insights for the Holy Use of Your Time”¹⁹ would be right up their alley.

It’s important to notice which of these categories the preacher falls into as it is the place from which they will tend to preach. Intersecting with the four preferences of listeners (as listed with the four bullet points above) is key to engaging people in the pews.

Preachers need to ask what parts of the sermon will inform and inspire, as well as make room for reflection and application. Luchetti suggests that preachers consider a four month sermon series designed to address each of the listening preferences.

The information series can focus on digging into the historical background of a book or character in the Bible. For the inspiration series, locate four narratives in Scripture that are guided by a theme such as comfort, healing, growth, etc. The reflection series can focus on some theological questions or doctrines. The application series can focus on something very practical, such as finances or relationships, for example.²⁰

Preachers need to remember there are those who think of their prodigal child while watching a baptism, those who grieve their own spouses every time a scripture mentions couples, and those who are so deep in debt that any mention of tithing makes them feel ashamed. Someone has said, “Preach to the suffering and you will never lack a congregation. There is a broken heart in every pew.”²¹

¹⁹ Luchetti, 65.

²⁰ Luchetti, 66.

²¹ Hulst, *A Little Handbook for Preachers* 104.

Contextual messages land on open ears. A listener may think: if you know me, if you are one of us, I'll listen to what you have to say. Contextual sermons will be more memorable than those that are not. If a story or an illustration hits home, listeners are more likely to remember the message. Contextual sermons allow preachers to tell the truth about our lives, our situations, and our need for God. We can name realities because it's where we live. There is hospitality for the listener when we gear our sermons to a particular people, time and place. When we as preachers weave into our sermons what's happening in the world, in the church, in the congregation, and their lives, listeners are reminded that the preacher is in the world too. Knowing the contexts of individuals we can better touch places of suffering. We can address questions on the hearts of listeners. If we know who we are and where we are, we can dream together about where we might go together and who we might yet be. Most importantly, contextual sermons will showcase what God is up to right in our own backyards.

The Book of Acts features contextual sermons that preach to particular communities. Examples of sermons directly pointed to hearers' context are the sermons Peter geared to Jewish listeners in Acts 2-3 where he lifted up Jewish scriptures, and where he compared David and Jesus. Peter can freely talk about Jesus' life and death and resurrection. Why? He says God's activity will include "all who are far away." People in surprising places will be included in the promise. At the beginning of this sermon, the listeners see some as "Galileans." By the end, they see them as "brothers" and "leaders." Paul's sermon in Athens (Acts 17) has a very different context. In his book, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*, Professor Matthew Skinner wrote that this particular Pauline sermon would compare to Paul giving a speech at Harvard Yard or at a Mensa

conference.¹ Paul references poets and philosophers, and talks about humans' search for God. He has seen an altar dedicated to "an unknown God" and tells them in Acts 17:22, "I see how extremely religious you are in every way." He has an unknown God he wants to tell them about. Paul addresses their practice of finding God in immovable things like statues, figurines, and altars and invites them to see God in human existence and the natural order. He quotes Greek poets who back this up. "In him we live and move and have our being" (Epimenides, 6th century). "For we too are his offspring" (Aratus, 3rd century).

Listening to and asking listeners questions prepare preachers to bring the Gospel message home. As Leonora Tisdale writes:

A focus upon the culture in preaching encourages the preacher to recognize that some of the 'universals' she or he assumes in preaching may not be universals at all—but beliefs and values that are interpreted through a very particular cultural lens and vision.²

She goes on to write: It is impossible to preach in a more "seriously imaginable" way unless one first has some ideas of the imaginative worlds congregants already inhabit.³

In reflecting upon their sermons, faithful preachers ask themselves if their content has been contextual. Did they address the reality of the world and places where their hearers live? This is the joy of preaching: taking the wounds and joys of our people, their losses and victories, and naming them in such a way that they can see how their stories are woven into the Story. That is the beauty and goal and pleasure of preaching. We are not clinicians; we are not tacticians. We are singers of the song."⁴

¹ Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel* 124.

² Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 12.

³ Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* 48.

⁴ Hulst, *A Little Handbook for Preachers* 115.

Empathy Choices

Another effective habit for homiletical self-assessment is asking the question: “Have I, as preacher of this sermon, used empathy as a way to engage the hearer?”

New Testament Professor Mark Allan Powell suggests three ways to bridge the empathy choice gap in his book, *What Do They Hear?* Begin by casting the scriptures. Imagine you are starring in the story. With whom do you identify? Why? Read the story again and try a different role. Try to imagine the scene from that character’s perspective. It can be expansive for preaching to move outside your default empathy identifications. If you choose to highlight a specific empathy choice, you can be explicit about it. For instance, invite people to wonder about how a person in the story felt about what was happening. Or you could retell the story from that character’s point of view. Another option is to preach a sermon that allows for multiple empathetic connections. Powell talks about a sermon he wrote on John 6:1-13, the feeding of the 5,000. He first focused on the hungry multitude with the questions: “For what do I hunger? Who will feed me?” Next he highlighted questions from the disciples “What do I have to offer? Is it enough? He closed with the boy and his basket who asked “What am I willing to give up?”⁵ Listeners had three empathetic ways to connect.

The hearers of sermons do not always realize that they have chosen to empathize with certain characters. Powell uses the Good Samaritan story with the Tanzanians⁶ who empathize with the one in the ditch, needing to open themselves up to receiving help

⁵ Mark Allan Powell, *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap between Pulpit & Pew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 63.

⁶ Powell, 35.

from people who may not share their values. Powell poses the question: how would you preach on this story today in order to make it contextual? Who would the Samaritan be in the retelling of the story? How could you move your congregation to empathy for those they may despise?

Empathy cannot be assumed by clergy. Looking at the character roles in Mark 7:1-8, laity (according to Powell's research)⁷ identified much more with the disciples and the Pharisees than clergy did. Clergy generally empathized with Jesus. Laity are more likely to make connections with characters they see as similar. They are also more likely to own up to their mistakes or failings more than clergy.

Use of Stories

The best way to a listener's heart is through storytelling. "In fact, stories are the most powerful delivery tool for information, more powerful and enduring than any other art form."⁸ Stories are a great way to juxtapose what is with what could be. If peoples' hearts are open, they are more likely to make a change or follow you where you lead them. It's important for the preacher to visualize how they hope listeners will be inspired or changed after they leave the sermon and worship.

There are three types of stories:

- **Challenge Plot:** This type of story would have your audiences rooting for the underdog. This is the rags-to-riches, triumph-over-obstacles kind of story.

⁷ Powell, 55.

⁸ Duarte, *Resonate* 16.

- Connection Plot: This kind of story focuses on people who “build bridges” or develop relationships in spite of differences. A good story will include friendships that transcend social status, race, religion, or demography. These stories teach love, compassion, and inclusion.
- Creativity Plot: This type of story focuses on someone solving a long-forgotten puzzle, making a mental breakthrough, or innovatively resolving a crisis.⁹

Stories remind listeners of their own experiences which can help them in present circumstances. They require people to participate by listening. Finally, if they are simple, they can be remembered and shared.

Stories about extraordinary persons are great, but listeners may dismiss their example as too far from their reach. So the preacher is challenged to link everyday “person examples” to stories of famous icons.

In order to avoid always using our own life as a filter and as the source of illustrations, reflective preachers can think about how a particular passage applies to various age groups. Naming how each age is affected or challenged may also result in a shared revelation that pertains to all ages. You can also do the same thing as you consider categories of people: newly widowed, unemployed, gay or lesbian, worried about money, failing at school, victims of domestic abuse, caring for elderly parents.

Magic Realism

It is okay to tell fictional stories.

As retired preaching professor Ronald Allen pointed out in *Preaching: An Essential Guide*, “The Bible contains stories that are obviously made up,” such as

⁹ Heath & Heath, *Made to Stick* 40-41.

Jesus' parables or the Prophet Nathan's story of the theft of the ewe lamb.¹⁰ You can clue your listeners that the story is fictional with a phrase like "Once there was" or "A certain man." Fables or allegories are other examples of fictional stories, such as Martin Bell's "Barrington Bunny,"¹¹ or Walter Wangerin's story "Lily."¹² An implausible detail, such as talking animals or a beanstalk growing up into the sky, will demonstrate that the story takes place in the border between reality and fantasy. In fiction, this in-between genre is called "magic realism."¹³

Fred Craddock told a story in the form of "magic realism" to conclude a sermon on Matthew 13:24-30 he entitled "But What about the Weeds?"

Visiting in the home of a family he knew, Craddock watched their adopted racing dog as it lay on the floor in the den. A toddler pulled on its tail and an older child used its stomach for a pillow. Craddock asked the dog why it had quit racing. "Were you mistreated?" he asked. "No." Were you worn out, or luckless, or crippled, he wondered. "No," the dog said. "But why did you quit?" Craddock said. "I discovered that what I was chasing was not really a rabbit," the dog told him. "All that running and running and running and running, and what was I chasing? It wasn't even real."¹⁴

Craddock used the story to drive home his point that people can change, so that we should not presume to say what God will do with them.¹⁵

Call to Adventure

A preacher can create imbalance by alternating between what is and what could be. In a sense the preacher identifies what's wrong with current reality and why it's

¹⁰ Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 84.

¹¹ Martin Bell, *The Way of the Wolf: The Gospel in New Images* (New York: Seabury Press, 1968), 11-18.

¹² Walter Wangerin Jr., *Ragman and Other Cries of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 44-52.

¹³ Willabee, *The Write Stuff* 84.

¹⁴ Fred Craddock, *The Cherry Log Sermons* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 29-30.

¹⁵ Willabee, *The Write Stuff* 84.

worth it to take an action to improve their world. Listeners will want to hear what's at stake and how they can play a role in resolving the situation.

A preacher can create STAR moments giving people Something They'll Always Remember, driving the big idea home.¹⁶ In a fund raiser to address malaria, Bill Gates stated that more money is spent on baldness drugs for wealthy men than on fighting malaria for the poor. He released a jar of mosquitoes into the room saying, "There's no reason only poor people should have the experience."¹⁷ I presume Bill Gates then had some call to action so that people could respond such as setting aside a jar on one's dressing room counter to place some money every morning for the cause of addressing the need to assist in the effort to fight malaria.

Create Emotional Contrast

Another strategy the preacher can reflect upon in reviewing their sermons is identifying if any content can be changed from analytical to emotional. Preachers become more engaging when we move from data and facts to anecdotes, images, humor, and surprise. "Communal emotional response—hoots of laughter, shrieks of fear, gasps of dismay, and cries of anger—is a binding force that the storyteller must learn how to orchestrate."¹⁸

¹⁶ Duarte, *Resonate* 148.

¹⁷ Duarte, 149.

¹⁸ Duarte, 136.

Create Delivery Contrast

Be free to roam, enlarge your expressiveness, plan disruptions, embrace real-time feedback, use sound bites, polling, shout-outs, singing, and question-asking.

Calls to Action Based on Temperaments

The reflective preacher can get into the habit of assessing whether they remember there are listeners who represent different temperaments in their congregation. Doers instigate activities. Suppliers get resources. Influencers change perceptions. Innovators generate ideas. Sample calls to action that can be requested of them are as follows.

- The doer can be asked to assemble, decide, gather, respond, or try.
- The supplier can be asked to acquire, fund, provide resources, or provide support.
- The influencers can be asked to activate, adopt, empower, or promote.
- The innovator can be asked to create, discover, invent, or pioneer.¹⁹

Rebranding

Using a universally appealing idea can help an audience care about what you are saying. Using the words “honoring the game” instead of “sportsmanship” tells listeners you care about the sport and they are more likely to care also.

¹⁹ Duarte, 42.

Idea-Based Verses Issue-Based

An issue-based sermon focuses on morality while an idea-based sermon focuses on curiosity. An idea-based sermon focuses on a solution rather than a problem. The idea-based focus feels more like a gift than an ask.²⁰

Check Your Transitions

When the pastor-preacher has been working on a theme all week, what is clear to them may not be clear to listeners. O. Wesley Allen Jr. suggests that we think of preaching as driving a car with the hearers in the back seat.

As the driver you know where you are going and can take a sharp curve at a pretty fast speed because your body intuitively knows when and how to lean into the turn. But in the meantime those in the back seat who do not have a foot working the accelerator and brake or hands on the steering wheel are flung from side to side and get motion sickness. When we drive with someone in the car we have to pay more attention (than when we are alone) to easing into a stop at the intersection, slowing down on the curves, and not jerking our passengers when we hit the gas. So it is with preaching. The hearers need not know the final destination of the sermon from the moment it begins, but they do need to understand how each idea, statement, and image follows what just preceded and have a sense that it is preparing them for what follows immediately after.²¹

Get yourself into the habit of regularly asking if you as preacher connect one main thought with another? Or do you assume your listeners will make the connection? Indicating you are moving from one thought to the next will help listeners move with you. “A good rule of thumb is to make at least two transitional statements between main thoughts.”²² Here’s an example (transitional statements are in italics):

²⁰ Chris Anderson, *Ted Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking* (Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2018), 41.

²¹ Allen Jr., *Determining the Form* 9.

²² Reeb, *Say Something!* 20.

Do you ever struggle with prayer? Ever wonder if you are doing it right? You are not alone. *Believe it or not the disciples had questions about prayer too. They noticed Jesus habitually praying and wondered how it worked.* Let's take a look at what Jesus said to his disciples about prayer. I believe we will find some answers to our questions.²³

Word Choices

The Poet's Tool Bag

Preachers can benefit from increasing the tools in their tool bag and making time to use them. The Reverend Dr. Clayton Schmit, former seminary professor and now pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church (ELCA) in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, lectured on the poet's tool bag during one of our doctoral residencies. He inspired the class to consider how something is made, to craft the use of words, not just *what* the preacher will say but *how* they will say it. Schmit invited preachers to become poets with the gift of perception, mindful that the job of preachers is to bring the photo home. He wrote: "Spend time just looking at the beauty, or the struggle or pain around you. Store the images of those observations in the library of your memory and check those vivid images out as needed when you seek to speak truthfully about the world."²⁴ The job of preachers is not to satisfy people's hunger for God but to intensify it. Using fresh images is critical, "like biscuits baked fresh every morning."²⁵ Schmit urges preachers to stay away from clichés and big words and not to use Greek and Hebrew unless it pertains to the focus of

²³ Reeb, 20.

²⁴ Clayton Schmit, *Is There a Crisis in Preaching?* Doctor of Ministry in Biblical Preaching handout, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, June 2018, 7.

²⁵ Clayton Schmit, Doctor of Ministry in Biblical Preaching lecture, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, June 2018.

the sermon. He suggested that preachers use more of their time looking for phrases and experimenting with phrasing as a poet would do so.

Incarnational Language

Poet Kathleen Norris called depth or expressive language—"incarnational language"—"ordinary words that resonate with the senses as they aim for the stars." The prophet Isaiah did not say, "The people are perishable," he said, "All flesh is grass" (Isaiah 40:6, KJV).²⁶ The more specific we can be, the more universal we are," Barnwell said. "It's a paradox—but it's true."²⁷

Too often we may use the word God generically and only mention God the Son when preaching the Gospels, or only refer to the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Preachers need to stretch their language to help hearers look for God in fresh ways.

Sensory Exploration

One exercise that helps us create incarnational language is "sensory exploration."²⁸ Go through text with your nose: Do you smell anything? Go through the text with your body: Do you feel anything? Go through the text with your ears: Do you hear anything? Go through the text with your eyes: Do you see anything? Do you taste anything? Use your senses to imagine your way into a biblical passage.

"If you are preaching from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians, for example, sense the scene. See Paul in a Roman prison cell as he wrote the letter to the Philippian church. How does Paul hold his pen? What does he look like? How old is he? Is he frail? Are there muscle-bound guards at the cell door? How

²⁶ Willabee, *The Write Stuff* 90.

²⁷ Ysaye Barnwell, interview in *The Other Side*, July-August 1997, 47.

²⁸ Willabee, *The Write Stuff* 97-98.

big is the cell? Can you see other prisoners? What sounds do you hear in the prison?”²⁹

Sense the passage. Draw the passage. Write a story about it. Sensory exploration is another habit of effective preachers.

In a sermon titled “A Certain Unmistakable Fragrance,” priest and homiletics professor Charles Rice evoked listeners’ sensory imagination as he preached:

Christians have a certain smell, like Carl, the world’s champion maker of catfish bait. The secret of catfish bait according to (Carl’s) television interviewer is that it must smell to “high heaven.” Carl’s bait does, and so does Carl. He smells like his work, and he doesn’t seem to mind that he is not invited to many dinner parties.³⁰

Rhythm and Repetition

Rhythm is important for a preacher. Anaphora is the initial repetition of a word, phrase, or sentence in a sequence. “In his unique oral style, Rob Bell writes, ‘*Some* elder brothers never join the party. *Some* fathers never throw one. *Some* brothers never come back. *Some* things never get resolved.’” Epistrophe is the repetition of an ending word, phrase, or sentence in a sequence. “In 1 Corinthians 13:11a, in the King James Version: ‘When I was a *child*, I spoke as a *child*, I understood as a *child*, I thought as a *child*.’” A Repetend is an irregular repetition of a word, phrase, or line such as in Psalm 24:1: “God claims Earth and everything in it, God claims World and all who live on it.” Refrain is a sentence or phrase repeated at regular intervals such as “Did you really say, ‘Amen’?”

²⁹ Luchetti, *Preaching Essentials* 152.

³⁰ Carrell, *Preaching That Matters* 158.

Parallelism refers to similar or the same words or phrases being repeated for effect like, “Be not afraid. He has risen. Be not afraid. He has risen.”³¹

Three words in a phrase and three phrases in a row engage listeners. “Paul’s most recognizable use of the power of three is found in 2 Timothy 4:7: ‘I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.’”³² He is also repeating the “f” sound. The last word or phrase spoken in a sentence carries more weight for the listener. Key sentences and phrases should end with the most important word or idea. “Imagine if Paul had written these words to Timothy instead: ‘I have fought well. My race is over. My faith is strong.’” . . . Paul knew the power of a spoken sentence is felt in the last word.³³

Linguistic Tools

The prevailing metaphor and the repeated mantra can bring the sermon to a higher level. “This M & M (metaphor and mantra) combination can save the sermon from becoming overly conceptual and, therefore, vague. When the metaphor and the mantra align with the focus statement, listeners will have a difficult time forgetting the sermon.”³⁴

In Matthew 13:24, “Jesus stated the topic (“kingdom of heaven”) and framed it metaphorically (‘is like a man who sowed good seed in his field’), but he didn’t reveal the bottom-line thesis just yet. Instead, he drew listeners into the message by tapping their curiosity concerning the connection between the kingdom and the sower.”³⁵

³¹ Carrell, 158-160.

³² Reeb, *Say Something!* 44.

³³ Reeb, 45.

³⁴ Luchetti, *Preaching Essentials* 109.

³⁵ Luchetti, 126.

Jesus framed the kingdom of God metaphorically. In concluding, he simply resolved what would happen to the weeds and wheat. “He landed the sermonic plane that took flight in his introduction.”³⁶

Metaphor is an implied comparison that does not include the direct comparative word. “Emily Dickinson wrote, ‘Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul.’” A simile is a direct comparison using like or as: “We come this morning like empty pitchers to a full fountain.” Irony refers to an intended meaning that is contrary to more obvious meanings. “It’s easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye than for the rich to get into God’s kingdom.” Personification assigns human attributes to non-human entities so as an example: “Anglican priest and poet George Herbert describes prayer as ‘the soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage.’” Oxymoron is the use of contradictory concepts to create thought-provoking paradox. In Amy Grant’s song, “Better than a Hallelujah,” she sings, “Beautiful the mess we are, the honest cries of breaking hearts.”³⁷

Menu of Sounds

Lori Carrell offers an inspirational language menu of sounds. Alliteration—repetition of initial sounds, usually consonants such as “Lead **m**e to **m**y **M**aster’s **m**anger.” Consonance—repetition of internal or ending consonant sounds like “The days were accomplished that she should be delivered.” Assonance—repetition of vowel

³⁶ Luchetti, 128.

³⁷ Carrell, *Preaching That Matters* 160-162.

sounds such as “She **brought forth**.” Onomatopoeia—words that sound like what they symbolize like “clatter, clang, nibble, sip, slurp, and rip.”³⁸

Barbara Brown Taylor told how she “auditions” the words in her sermons: “The page is the stage where the words audition and rehearse. They file in to show me what they can do. I weed them out. They explain themselves to me. I ask for more feeling.”³⁹

Whenever you as sermon writer can, substitute concrete for abstract, specific for general, common for academic. Develop the habit of self-assessing recent sermons to see if you have done so. For example, instead of saying, “A period of unfavorable weather set in,” say, “It rained every day for a week.” Or, instead of “He showed satisfaction as he took possession of his well-earned reward,” write “He grinned as he pocketed the coin.”⁴⁰

Wherever the preacher can, they need to consider replacing general words with specific ones. Following are examples of enhanced sentences.

General: They helped restore property damaged by Hurricane Katrina.

Specific: They bagged debris from a flooded clinic in St. Bernard Parish: magazines, patient records, medical reference books, soggy rolls of gauze, and the occasional syringe.

Weak: He put the book on the table.

Stronger: He slammed the book on the table.

Weak: He corrected her statement.

Stronger: “You’re wrong,” he said.

Passive: My first visit to the Holy Land will always be remembered by me.

Active: I will always remember my first visit to the Holy Land.

Passive: There were a great number of dry bones lying in the valley.

³⁸ Carrell, 157.

³⁹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Way Beyond Belief: The Call to Behold,” (Lecture, Festival of Faith and Writing, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, April 24, 2004).

⁴⁰ William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1972), 15.

Active: Dry bones covered the valley floor.⁴¹

Pick a random paragraph from a sermon and replace words with stronger ones. When describing objects, “it is more compelling to say ‘a one-eyed doll with a Mohawk haircut’ than ‘toy,’ or ‘a yellow Hummer with spinners’ than ‘car.’”⁴² To develop your preacher vocabulary, Carrell suggests reading material from perspectives other than your own, using your Thesaurus, and keeping a running list of words that enhance sensory descriptions.

Introducing New Ideas

Preachers often have to explain a powerful new idea. It’s helpful to ask what the audience already knows about the topic and to lead them on a discovery tour. Begin with what they know and build on their knowledge or experience. One Ted Talk speaker used getting dressed in the morning to explain JavaScript. “Imagine if you were getting dressed in the morning and it was possible to put your shoes on before your jeans (or your jeans on before your underpants)! That can happen in JavaScript.”⁴³

Most people will not remember abstract ideas. Linguist Samuel Hayakawa came up with a valuable tool to help communicators express concrete ideas. It is called “the Ladder of Abstraction.”

At the top of the ladder are big, abstract ideas like faith, hope, and love. At the bottom of the ladder are concrete ideas like praying hands (faith), a new born baby (hope), or a cross (love). Like a real ladder, the bottom of the ladder of abstraction is best supported by solid or concrete—tangible words and specific descriptions. As you go up the ladder, ideas get more general and abstract. In

⁴¹ Willabee, *The Write Stuff* 113.

⁴² Willabee, 76.

⁴³ Anderson, *Ted Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking* 78.

order to be an effective communicator, you must move up and down the ladder. It is only in giving specific examples of your sermon's big picture that it becomes inspiring and memorable.⁴⁴

Reeb gives an example of a sermon he preached using a concrete illustration to describe the work of the Holy Spirit:

We need to reaffirm our belief in the Holy Spirit. It lives inside every Christian. The Holy Spirit is willing to nourish, guide, and empower us for living. Do we realize how fortunate we are to have the Holy Spirit mentoring us? Let's say for a moment that I went into a music shop and bought a guitar. After I bought my guitar I signed up for group lessons. Imagine if Eric Clapton walked into one of my lessons and said to me, "I like the way you play. I see some potential in you. I am going to give you this option. You can continue taking this class once a week, or I will meet with you one on one for an hour every day and teach you everything I know." What do you think I would do? I would go crazy. "Yes! Yes! When do we start?" Maybe a year later someone would ask me, "Where did you learn how to play the guitar? Who taught you?" Perhaps I would be modest and say, "I just took some lessons." You might share you were taught by a master. You can really play! In the same way when we allow the Holy Spirit to mentor us through regular prayer and scripture reading it won't be long before someone asks, "Where did you get that insight?" or says, "There is something different about you." You might reply, "I go to church once a week." And they will respond, "No, you don't just go to church once a week. You have been spending time with the Holy Spirit."⁴⁵

Surprise

Audiences are captivated by surprising facts and words. Preachers can open gaps in their messages for the audience to close withholding vital information and saving it for a big reveal. Thomas G. Long, author and Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, recommends:

Disruptive terminology which he describes as "a verbal surprise, an unexpected element.... something like a speed bump." . . . Verbal surprises in the form of unanswered questions, deviations from the pastor's typical patterns, or unusual word combinations provoked the thinking of nearly every kind of listener.

⁴⁴ Reeb, *Say Something!* 48.

⁴⁵ Reeb, 49.

Consider metaphor, antithesis, and situational irony to propel you toward disruptive terminology choices.⁴⁶

Preacher and author Max Lucado uses antithesis, the essence of ideas revealed through contrast, in the following example. “Many of us are too fluent in the language of loneliness. No one knows me, we think. People know my name, but not my heart. They know my face, but not my feelings. I have a Social Security number, but not a soul mate. No one really knows me.”⁴⁷

Humor

“Audiences who laugh with you quickly come to like you. And if people like you, they’re much readier to take seriously what you have to say. Laughter blows open someone’s defenses, and suddenly you have a chance to truly communicate with them.”⁴⁸

Sarah Willobee suggests that self-deprecating humor disarms listeners and helps dismantle the pedestal on which we often stand.⁴⁹

Tell an experience from your youth or childhood—fighting with a bully, rescuing an animal, creating a secret hideaway, being lost from parents, moving to a new place, surviving an outdoor adventure, beginning a new year of school, going on your first date. Be sure to incorporate setting, characters, objects, and action/conflict.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Carrell, *Preaching That Matters* 174.

⁴⁷ Carrell, 160.

⁴⁸ Anderson, *Ted Talks* 54.

⁴⁹ Willobee, *The Write Stuff* 25.

⁵⁰ Willobee, 78.

Props and Images

Props and images can be effective if they serve the entire sermon. As you read through a passage, consider the following questions:

- 1) If I had to draw a picture of this passage what would it look like?
- 2) What colors would I use?
- 3) Does the passage change color, moving from dark to light?
- 4) Does this passage remind me of an event that has happened in my life? In the life of the church?
- 5) Is there something happening in the world right now that could serve as an image in this sermon (the Tour de France, a global summit, a yacht race, an election)?
- 6) If I had to teach this passage to eight-year-olds, how would I do it?
- 7) If there was one picture on the bulletin cover or on the screen that captured this sermon, what would it be?⁵¹

Sermon Formulas

Plot is the means by which sermons move. For sermons that generate suspense by arousing curiosity, thwarting expectations, or opposing viewpoints, Fred Craddock highlights some of his own strategies in his book *Preaching*:

- a) What is it? What is it worth? How can I get it?
- b) Explore, explain, apply
- c) Problem, solution
- d) What it is not, what it is

⁵¹ Hulst, *A Little Handbook for Preachers* 94.

- e) Promise, fulfillment
- f) Ambiguity, clarity
- g) Not this, nor this, nor this, nor this, but this
- h) The flashback (from present to past to present)
- i) From the lesser to the greater.⁵²

Another sermon form comes from alternating between the biblical story and our contemporary situation. Eugene Lowry, Emeritus Professor of Preaching at Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri, in *How to Preach a Parable*, describes three ways to accomplish this:

- “Delaying the story: beginning with a contemporary concern, then moving into the biblical story;
- Suspending the story: beginning with the text, running into some kind of trouble in the text, then stepping outside it for more information;
- Alternating the story: dividing the story line of the text into sections and interspersing it with contemporary material.”⁵³

Reeb talks about the Borden Formula⁵⁴ named after Richard Borden who was a professor of public speaking at New York University and a noted presenter. The Borden Formula proposes that the speaker imagine listeners are shouting these four statements: 1)

⁵² Fred Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 177.

⁵³ Eugene Lowry, *How to Preach a Parable: Designs for Narrative Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 79-114.

⁵⁴ Reeb, *Say Something!* 10-11.

“Ho hum. This better be interesting.” 2) “Why bring that up? What does this have to do with me? Why should I care?” 3) “For instance . . . what are examples? 4) “So what? Now what?” Reeb also highlights Monroe’s Motivated Sequence, developed by Alan Monroe, who taught public speaking at Purdue University. This sequence can be used to help the listener solve a problem, mystery, or question. 1) Attention: Lifting up the problem. 2) Need: Why it affects the listener. 3) Satisfaction: Offer a solution. 4) Visualization: Describe outcome if solved and also left unsolved. 5) Action: Invitation to solve.

Reeb has devised his own AGAPE method: anticipation, grace, answer, proclamation, and explosion.

- 1) Anticipation: Begin your message with tension by lifting up a problem, mystery, or conflict and promising to solve it. This creates anticipation in listeners. Describe your experience with the problem and how we fail at solving the problem. Express the reward that comes with finding the solution.
- 2) Grace: Allow God’s grace through scripture to help solve the problem, mystery, or conflict. Search scripture in the hope of relieving the tension, and related the text to the lives of your listeners.
- 3) Answer: Relieve the tension by communicating the answer based on scripture. Make the answer concrete. Don’t just say it; show it. Use descriptive language, stories, and examples to illustrate the solution. Aesop’s fables have been famous for the last 2,500 years. Stories such as “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” are remembered because the language is concrete and has staying power.

- 4) Proclamation: Move from explaining to proclaiming by expressing why your answer is important and call your listeners to act on your message. Help your listeners imagine how different their lives will be with the solution. Let your convictions fly and provide a “handle” so your listeners can grab on to your message and apply it.
- 5) Explosion: Create an explosion of inspiration in the hearts of your listeners with an illustration, story, video, or visual aid. Be sure to conclude the sermon soon after the explosion so listeners will feel inspired leaving worship.

Most stories begin with a character who faces conflict (anticipation). This character is provided help by a special person (grace). The character learns a lesson or finds a solution and acts on it (answer and proclamation). Finally, there is a climax and/or resolution when the character defeats evil, gets back together with a loved one, or saves a village (explosion).⁵⁵

Another method is preparing the sermon like a trial lawyer. 1) Promise to solve the case. 2) Lay out the evidence. 3) Dispute counterarguments. 4) Appeal to emotions. 5) Provide testimony. 5) Call for a verdict.

Mind Mapping

After you have developed your sermon outline or manuscript, draw a tree trunk and several thick lines coming out of the trunk as branches. Write your big idea on the trunk and your primary moves on the branches. Draw two to four thin lines as twigs on the branches. On each of the thin twigs, write a word that reminds you about what you

⁵⁵ Reeb, 14-16.

want to say about the branches. Order thoughts from the left side of the tree to the right side of the tree. The mind map helps with recall but also fosters sermon clarity. You can add another branch where you need to as well as prune branches or twigs that no longer fit.

A Good Ending (Not Far from the Beginning)

“The sermon conclusion is the preacher’s final and thoughtful attempt to get the people to drink the life-giving water of Christ.”⁵⁶ A good ending is critical. Poet T. S. Elliot wrote: “What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.”⁵⁷ The ending of a great narrative is the first thing the audience remembers. Create endings that encompass what the world will look like should they accept your challenge, comfort, etc. “What will their lives look like?” “Humanity?” “The planet?”

CLOSE is an acronym reminding you of options for good closings. **C**ircle **B**ack—Refer to an earlier quote or story. **L**ead them to Christ—Invite them to affirm or reaffirm their faith. **O**pportunity—Give them a call to action. **S**ummarize—Review key points and what’s at stake. **E**xplosion—Close with an inspirational story or illustration.⁵⁸

O. Wesley Allen Jr. comments,

“One of the greatest (and most common) sins of preachers is not knowing when to end a sermon and thus ending in an anticlimactic manner. We have offered an image that exemplifies or encapsulates our claim, but then we just cannot resist adding one more comment, pulling it all together with a predictable question (“What is God calling you to do?”), or summarizing what we have said. It’s like

⁵⁶ Luchetti, *Preaching Essentials* 129.

⁵⁷ Duarte, *Resonate* 45.

⁵⁸ Reeb, *Say Something!* 59.

trying to explain, defend, or apologize for a joke after the punch line has been delivered. If a joke requires commentary, it either was not a good joke or was not told well. Similarly, at the end of a journey, the driver need not remind the passengers of where they have been or where they have arrived or reiterate why the journey was important or ask them whether they got the point of the trip. To do so diminishes the passengers' own experience of the journey. Indeed, it shows a lack of trust in the power of the journey and of the destination themselves. Preaching is the same. We should lead our hearers up to a climactic moment and then trust them and the gospel to do the rest."⁵⁹

Professor Schmit reminded students, "Don't run past the goal line into the next field."⁶⁰ TED talks have a maximum time limit of 18 minutes and most are much shorter. The time should be enough for the preacher to say something that matters and short enough that people do not lose interest. Shorter talks require more preparation time. "President Woodrow Wilson was once asked about how long it took him to prepare for a speech. He replied: "That depends on the length of the speech. If it is a 10-minute speech it takes me all of two weeks to prepare it; if it is a half-hour speech it takes me a week; if I can talk as long as I want to it requires no preparation at all. I am ready now."⁶¹ "The secret in successful talks is often in what is left out."⁶²

Practice, Practice, Practice

Embodied Preaching

Videotape yourself and watch yourself with the sound off. This is another habit of the self-reflective preacher. Look for the following things:

⁵⁹ Allen Jr., *Determining the Form* 12.

⁶⁰ Schmit, Doctor in Biblical Preaching Lecture, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, June 2018.

⁶¹ Anderson, *Ted Talks* 34-35.

⁶² Anderson, 36.

- 1) Do you repeat certain gestures? Common ones involve frequent adjustment of glasses, holding one side of the pulpit more than the other, picking up something and then putting it down, taking a drink of water at certain points of the sermon, raising and then lowering the stand that your notes are on, or touching a part of your face.
- 2) Do you use one side of your body more than the other?
- 3) If you do not stay behind the pulpit, do you gravitate toward one area of the stage, chancel or platform? Do you know why you go there?
- 4) Pay attention to where you are looking: do your eyes connect with everyone in the sanctuary—front third, middle third, rear third; right side, left side, balcony? It's odd, but often the front rows get very little eye contact. Most of us also tend to look at one side more than the other.
- 5) How do you move your head? A declarative stance (head squared on shoulders, chin up slightly) says you believe what you're saying.
- 6) If you preach from a manuscript, how often and for how long do you look at it? We often underestimate how long our eyes are down.⁶³ For manuscript preachers, avoid sentences longer than twelve words; they are simply too hard to deliver well. Slide your sermon pages instead of picking them up.

We preachers need to be aware of how we communicate a timeline with our body.

When people are watching us, their timelines go from our right to our left. This feels backwards to us as we preach, but if we flip our gestures and put, say, the creation event

⁶³ Hulst, *A Little Handbook for Preachers* 140.

at our far right and the return of Jesus at our far left, that will make perfect sense to those who are watching us.

We can also mark out areas of the stage, chancel or platform for different times, places or people. Maybe one area is Paul and the other is the Philippians who are receiving the letter. Maybe one area is death and one is life.⁶⁴

Watch the video again with the sound on. Observe the following:

- 1) What is the speed of your speaking?
- 2) Does the speed match the space, the formality of the service and the language skills of the listeners?
- 3) Does the speed vary? If we think of a speed range from 1 to 10, with 1 being boringly slow and 10 being I-can't-understand-you fast, we can strive for a range from 4-6, with occasional dips to 3 and rises to 8.
- 4) Does your volume rise and fall?
- 5) When you say something exciting, sad, or troubling, does your voice match it?
- 6) Does your volume drop at the end of sentences?⁶⁵

Don't put on another voice. Be yourself. However, when you're up in front, you may need to be a bigger version of yourself.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Hulst, 141.

⁶⁵ Hulst, 143.

⁶⁶ Hulst, 145.

Preparation in Review

Spending time watching ourselves on video and honing our delivery is not done in order to look good but to minimize distractions and maximize the gospel.⁶⁷ The faithful preacher gets in the habit of asking reflective questions like:

- Did they make time to practice before preaching?
- Were they able to share the introduction, stories, and conclusion without looking down?
- Did the preacher use their normal, conversational voice from time to time, as if you are talking with a friend?

What the preacher gains from reviewing their delivery will enhance how their message is heard in a future sermon.

Learning from Other Preachers

Another habit for homiletical self-assessment is reading and listening to sermons by other preachers. This can increase our vocabulary, expand our insights into scripture, as well as introduce us to new techniques. Following are three preachers and examples of what pastor-preachers might learn from them and keep in mind as they prepare and reflect on their own sermons.

John Ortberg

John Ortberg is an evangelical Christian author and Senior Pastor of Menlo Presbyterian Church in Menlo Park, California. He is a master storyteller. Ortberg effectively uses stories to help people remember the main focus of his sermons. A key in

⁶⁷ Hulst, 153.

using stories is ending the story with a resolution, a moral or core message, a most important point, otherwise people may draw their own conclusion from a story. In one of his sermons, Ortberg uses a story about his sister's rag doll as a thread through the message⁶⁸. The point of the story was that people want to be loved in spite of the unlovable things they know about themselves. He told the rag doll story and then returned to it several times during the sermon. He used phrases from the rag doll concept to describe people as broken yet lovable. He talked about a kind of love that seeks value in what is loved verses a love that creates value in what is loved. At one point, Ortberg referred to the rag doll story again saying if you love God, you have to love God's rag dolls, because nobody is perfect. Jesus says, 'Love me, love my rag dolls.' It's a package deal. You can't have one without the other."⁶⁹ Ortberg concludes by convincing listeners that a person's value is determined by how loved they are and then asks them the question, who can you love today?

If people can recall, repeat and transfer the preacher's message, it is likely their message was successfully conveyed. In order to ensure people remember a message, repeat a key phrase more than once, and punctuate it with a pause to emphasize what has just been said. (The use of pauses at vital parts of one's sermon greatly assists not only in the preacher being heard but also allows the hearer the opportunity to remember what has been said.) Memorable sound bites include imitating a famous phrase or creating your own new sound bite. Many who were alive and old enough to understand a critical moment in history remember Ronald Reagan's words: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this

⁶⁸ Duarte, *Resonate* 156.

⁶⁹ John Ortberg, "Valuable Raggedness," <http://www.johnortberg.com/valuable-raggedness/12/6/13>, (accessed 12/15/19).

wall.” How many millions around the globe can repeat from memory Neil Armstrong’s statement: “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.”

Barbara Brown Taylor

Thomas Long analyzes a sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor in his book *The Witness of Preaching*. It is a great example of how preachers can offer listeners a new perspective on a well-known and traditionally-understood passage of scripture. Taylor’s sermon “The Lost and Found Department” is based on the three parables of Jesus in Luke 15: the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son.

In her exegesis, Taylor became convinced that the usual interpretation of this text—namely, that it is basically about repentance—is not quite on target. The main thrust of these parables, she discerned, is not about repentance but rejoicing: heaven’s rejoicing and our rejoicing over the lost who are found and restored.⁷⁰

She knew that the congregation would recall that this text is all about repentance. Long identifies the moves by which Taylor hoped to change their minds.

Move A) Taylor points out, “We love these stories because we imagine ourselves on the receiving end.” We think of ourselves as the lost lamb, lost coin, or lost son, always ready to repent and fall on the grace of a loving God. “There are stories about me,” she says, “and I treasure them all.”

Move B) First, she points out that the original hearers of these parable, the religious leaders, were not nearly as charmed by these stories as we seem to be. They were deeply offended by Jesus’ ministry to sinners. Second, she points out that it is not at all clear that repentance is at the center of these stories. She says

⁷⁰ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 166.

that “the lost sheep does not repent as far as I can tell and the lost coin certainly doesn’t. They are both simply found.”

Move C) Having described problems with the traditional interpretation, she names three possibilities with the text.

- 1) We could just go with the traditional interpretation.
- 2) It is possible later editors of the story reshaped them to make sure repentance was emphasized. That’s why the repentance theme doesn’t quite line up with the details.
- 3) We have been missing the point all along. “These are not parable about lost sheep and lost coins at all, but parables about good shepherds and diligent sweepers.”

Move D) Taylor says if you are willing to be a shepherd, then the story sounds different.

Move E) When we find lost sheep we have joy in the finding, regardless of whether they are repentant or not. She tells a story about a group hiking trip and their experience of “finding” one of their own who was lost.

Move F) She concludes by saying, “When I am working so hard to . . . stay found, it is difficult not to judge those who seem to capitalize on staying lost. I want to believe that they are not merely lost people, but that they are bad people. . . . Then I hear someone behind me who calls me by my name, and big brown hands grab me by the scruff of the neck, hauling me through the air laying me across a pair of shoulders that smell of sweet grass and sunshine and home, and I am so surprised,

and so relieved to be found that my heart feels like it is being broken into, broken open, while way off somewhere I hear the riotous sound of angels rejoicing.”

Her sermon actually reveals that we are not the repentant sinners we fancy ourselves to be, but unrepentant and lost. Even then we are found and heaven rejoices.⁷¹

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Another master preacher, Martin Luther King, Jr., used a variety of writing techniques to convey his messages.⁷² King’s sermons incorporated sacred association conjuring up familiar scripture. In a sermon on Vietnam, King preached: “The shirtless and barefoot people of the world are rising up as never before. The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.”⁷³ At the conclusion of one of his final sermons, King quotes the book of Job, “And that day the morning stars will sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy.”⁷⁴

King practiced a non-confrontive style of inclusion. He always included himself by saying “we”. He also “soft-pedaled” the sinfulness of segregation by explaining that racists really aren’t evil but only afraid.⁷⁵ King did not use the Bible as a political

⁷¹ Long, 167-170.

⁷² Martin Luther King and James M. Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986).

⁷³ Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Word that Moved America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 130.

⁷⁴ Lischer, 130.

⁷⁵ Lischer, 153.

function. In one of his sermons he preaches: “Even the oppressed” he insists, “are potential oppressors.”⁷⁶

King engaged listeners by using engaging language in provocative ways. In his sermon “A Knock at Midnight,” King uses the word midnight to represent deep darkness in America, the word knock for the world’s need of spiritual help, and the word bread to signify what only the church can give.⁷⁷ He moved away from metaphor to metonymy which is a predictable metaphor. He said in one sermon: “I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless night of racism and war the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality...”⁷⁸ “King sprinkled his sermons with *sententiae*, brief, pithy, and balanced maxims such as: We’ve ended up building guided missiles and leaving misguided men.”⁷⁹ Glissandos were common in King’s sermons. They are the repetition of a word like “all.” King once used the word “wrong” 20 times in 90 seconds.

King’s “I Have a Dream” speech⁸⁰ created a movement. His goal was to end racial segregation and discrimination by peaceful means. He is a master in using language. Here is a look at some of his techniques. First, King uses metaphor to create images in people’s minds.

“in whose symbolic shadow we stand today,”

⁷⁶ Lischer, 205.

⁷⁷ Lischer, 207.

⁷⁸ Lischer, 124.

⁷⁹ Lischer, 150.

⁸⁰ King and Washington, *Testament of Hope* 217-220.

“a great beacon light of hope”

“seared in the flames of withering injustice”

“sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.”

“a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.”

“languished in the corners”

“we have come to our nation’s capital to cash a check.”

“a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.”

“defaulted on this promissory note”

“America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’”

“the bank of justice is bankrupt.”

“insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity”

“cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.”

“the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.”

“dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice.”

“quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.”

“The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.”

“stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice.”

“Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.”

“We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back.”

“quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering.”

“not wallow in the valley of despair.”

“table of brotherhood.”

“sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression,”

“an oasis of freedom and justice.”

“his lips dripping”

“the mountain of despair a stone of hope,”

“transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.”

Next, King uses repetition to create emphasis. MLK, like many African-American preachers, grew up hearing and ended up using the powerful technique of repetition.

“One hundred years later, the Negro” (four repetitions)

“Now is the time” (four repetitions)

“We must” (four repetitions)

“We can never be satisfied” (four repetitions, followed by “We cannot be satisfied as long as” and “We are not satisfied” and “We will not be satisfied”)

“Go back” (six repetitions)

“I have a dream” (nine repetitions)

“One day” “the day” “that day” (ten repetitions)

“With this faith” (three repetitions)

“Let freedom ring” (twelve repetitions)

King inserts political references and memorable political language to add weight to his words.

“Five score years ago,”

“signed the Emancipation Proclamation”

“Constitution and the Declaration of Independence,”

“unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

“a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote.”

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

“even the state of Mississippi,”

“in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor”

Finally, familiar phrases establish common ground for listeners. The preacher can strive to use, if missing, language that does indeed “establish common ground” between preacher and hearer.

“a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.”

“sweltering summer of the Negro’s legitimate discontent”

“an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality”

“justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

“every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”

“My country, ‘tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim’s pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.”

“Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”

Listen to a sermon or two by one of your favorite preachers. Identify why they are your favorites. What can you learn from them? Reading and listening to sermons by other preachers can improve our writing skills and open us to new scripture insights by other theologians. We might not all be a Frederick Buechner and we do not need to be. However, reading Buechner will enlarge our world and bless our efforts to stretch our best selves.

The three sermons discussed in this chapter reveal opportunities the reflective preacher can have to learn from preachers who have highly developed the craft of preaching. Getting into the habit of reading and reflecting upon their sermons is a way to grow in our preaching. As a preacher prepares a sermon manuscript, outline, or sermon notes, the preacher might well see there are places where they could include new techniques and use of language to strengthen their proclamation. Such use of language may include poignant stories, memorable statements, repetition, the use of a pause for emphasis or to aid in the understanding of what had just been said, and/or a familiar verse of scripture or hymn.

Consideration of verbal techniques and crisp, powerful language doesn’t mean the pastor-preacher is aiming to become a well-known preacher of the Good News. Nevertheless, use of some of the styles of well-known preachers can punctuate a local

pastor-preacher's proclamation in ways that engage sermon hearers and create a memory of what their pastor said in her sermon. Learning from other preachers is an effective habit that will lead to faithful preparation of the next sermon and to faithful proclamation of the Good News to the glory of God.

Summary

This thesis writer is hopeful that these ideas might spark preachers' imaginations as they engage in the hard work of analyzing their sermons. As the pastor-preacher critically examines their "offerings" to their respective congregations, they are much more likely to reach listeners with their heartfelt hard work. This thesis writer has been inspired to spice up her own proclamations and she hopes that readers might also find inspiration that will cause listeners to tune in and stay tuned in. A preacher's next sermon may improve only as much as the learnings they gain from new habits they develop for homiletical self-assessment.

CHAPTER 5

REVIEWING THE PREACHER'S SERMONS

Criteria for a “good” sermon are as vast as the stars in the sky. The criteria are influenced by the religion, denomination, affiliations, contextual location, education, personalities and experiences of the listeners and preachers. The Reverend Dr. Clayton Schmit has said, “Rather than try to be a good preacher, be a faithful preacher. The goodness is always in God’s hands.”¹ In a handout² edited by several Luther Seminary faculty, the faithful sermon is said to:

- Engage the Biblical text and be rigorous with regard to the specific voice of each biblical text.
- Engage the human condition and God’s response. Where are we in the text? Who are we in the text? What is our human issue? And, what is God’s answer?
- Engage the contexts narratively, liturgically, locally, nationally, or globally.
- Engage the theological imagination. What is God up to? What are breadth and depth metaphors for God and God’s activity?

¹ Karoline Lewis, David Lose, Clay Schmit *Criteria for a “Good” Sermon* handout. Doctor of Ministry in Biblical Preaching, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, June 2017, 1.

² Lewis, Lose, Schmit, 1.

- Engage the mind of the listener with a clear sermon focus and design that is easy to understand.
- Engage the heart of the listener through the sermon function and delivery.
- Engage orientation to life in God's world. What is our response to God's grace? How can we embody God's love in the world? Always what we are asked to do in the imperative arises from what God has already done.

The best preachers are the best listeners. Listening to the congregation is critical for pastors. Luchetti recommends a congregational survey that asks: Why do you attend church? What three things do you need most right now? How would you describe your relationship with God? What do you hope for from the weekly sermon? How would you describe the preaching in the church?³

This researcher's parish response group of eight was given a variety of questions from Luther Seminary faculty members depending on the curriculum foci. The Reverend Dr. Karoline Lewis is the Marbury E. Anderson Chair in Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. She provided the following review questions for sermons based on texts from the Gospel of John.

- 1) How did you hear the passage from John in the sermon? Please share some specific examples, that is, verses, images, language.
- 2) Did you hear other passages from John in the sermon?
- 3) When you think about the biblical passage and the sermon, did the general tone and feeling of the text come through in the sermon? How or how not?

³ Luchetti, *Preaching Essentials* 57.

- 4) How did you experience this passage from John in the sermon? That is, how did it affect you?
- 5) How did the sermon help you sense what it means to call the Bible, the Word of God? Did the sermon help you think about the importance of biblical preaching?
- 6) Did the sermon give you an imagination for how to read and make sense of the Bible?

The Reverend Dr. Shauna Hannan, Professor of Homiletics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, California, gave the parish response group questions that addressed how the preacher met contextual issues.

1. What happened to you as you listened to this sermon?
2. According to this sermon, who is God and how is God at work in the world?
3. What do you appreciate about the sermon?
4. What did you hear that you are eager to share with another person?
5. How might your actions change as a result of this sermon?
6. What in this sermon entices you to learn more about the biblical text?
7. For what or for whom does this sermon prompt you to pray?

The Reverend Dr. Clayton J. Schmit provided this outline for reviewing *how* the Word is proclaimed.

- 1) Were assertions, conclusions, claims appropriate based on the biblical text?
- 2) Was the proclamation relevant, timely, immediate, and focused?
- 3) Was it organized to flow logically with clear transitions?
- 4) Were illustrations pertinent? Was interest created and points compelling?
- 5) Was delivery and demeanor energized and genuine?

What the parish response group found most helpful were the following questions from Dr. Karoline Lewis. What was the message? How did it connect? What worked well? What would have helped it? What was one thing not to change?

Anglican Pastor Kevin Miller, writer, editor, and director for *Christianity Today*, cites *The Checklist Manifesto* book in which surgeon Atul Gawande suggests that to ensure we do most jobs right—fly a plane, finish a building project, cook dinner—we need a checklist.⁴ Miller says “If Gawande uses one before surgeries, surely I can use a checklist before my sermons.”⁵ Miller’s personal sermon checklist includes the following questions:

- 1) What is this text primarily about? What is it saying about what it’s about?
- 2) Why did the original audience need to hear the message and why will people have to keep listening to me?
- 3) How will my listener instinctively push back on, or not accept, this truth? How can I show I understand and feel that concern and can even see some good in it?
- 4) What will I do, think, or say as a result of hearing my own message?

This Researcher’s Recommendation

A sermon review by the pastor has to be quick and easy or other tasks will take its place. This researcher recommends that pastor-preachers get into the habit of using a fast self-appraisal within a day or two of a preached sermon. Here are the questions.

⁴ Atul Gawande, *The Checklist Manifesto* (New York: Picador, 2011).

⁵ Kevin Miller. “The Power of the Sermon Checklist and Why You Need One and How to Make One,” <https://anglicanpastor.com/the-power-of-the-sermon-checklist-why-you-need-one-and-how-to-make-one.com>, (accessed 12/20/2019).

- 1) How did you feel about your sermon? Were you excited to give it? Are you content with it? Why or why not?
- 2) What would you change or keep the same?
- 3) What was the “take-away” people mentioned? Was it in line with your purpose? Were you surprised by any responses?
- 4) Was there a clear ending you heard while you were delivering the sermon? (In other words, did you go past the goal line?)

Here is a four-part questionnaire for pastor-preachers to conduct annually.

- 1) After twelve months (less or more depending on how often you preach), what were your themes, sermonic claims, or take-a-ways? Were these almost always the same all year long? What might a listener’s take-a-way be for the year? Does what you learn match your intentions?
- 2) What themes or topics were missing from what you would like your listeners to learn or how you would like them to grow?
- 3) To engage listeners in fresh ways, how varied were your sermon forms? Are there ruts you’ve fallen into over time?
- 4) Overall, how would you rate yourself on solid biblical analysis, theology, and contextual relevance?

Perhaps an overnight retreat (for the preacher or a group of pastors) might be a way to make time for an annual review of sermons.

Summary

Preachers share a great responsibility to grow and refine their craft. Developing effective habits for homiletical self-assessment is critical. Listeners are counting on

pastors to bring them the life-giving and life-saving word. Some are hanging on by a thread waiting for a word that will say their life has meaning. Other listeners need a wake-up call to come alive again. Listeners' circumstances are vast, but the one thing needed is Christ. He is living water and the only bread that can satisfy thirsty and hungry people. It is a high calling to preach and a commission not to take lightly.

The preachers' work is also filled with joy and satisfaction. The pastor-preacher has a front row seat in watching God work, and what could be better than discovering a jewel glistening in scripture that we've never seen before and uncovering it for all to see and from which to benefit (preachers and hearers alike)?

CHAPTER 6

THE BENEFITS OF TEAM APPRAISAL

This researcher's classmates in the Doctor of Ministry in Biblical Preaching program shared that they have not assessed sermons in a formal way. Some of them make notes about what worked and didn't work. A few of them have individuals whom they trust who offer feedback following a preaching event. As mentioned in chapter 5, they are not answering consistent questions that might offer them themes and learnings that may enhance their preaching going forward. My thesis advisor The Reverend Dr. Richard Rehfeldt writes:

In conversations with colleagues about their sermons after they preached them, almost all of them (in my forty plus years as a fulltime parish pastor) say they keep their sermons. Some, like my co-pastor for twenty-one years, simply kept them neatly in a drawer. The ONLY time any of my colleagues would look at their "old" sermons was to consider using parts of them when they lead worship at a senior center or when they came to the same text three years later and wanted to see what they preached on (as topic). NEVER did any of my colleagues say they looked at their old sermons to evaluate how they could have been even more creative and engaging for the benefit of listeners.

When a pastor (like me) would look at an old sermon (perhaps to see the topic discussed three years earlier on the same text) they would say "wow that was a LONG sermon" or "oh my, that was a dull sermon." But neither they, nor I, would do the hard but vital work of self-assessing, evaluating, and attempting to improve the old sermons in order to practice sharpening our writing and preparation skills for the future.

I do know in the sermons I hear pastors use hackneyed introductions like "When I read this text at the beginning of the week I thought this was a difficult text to preach upon" or "I didn't want to preach on it." "Plus I often hear a sermon that just seems to "stop" with my thinking "is the preacher finished?" "More. I almost never hear a pastor continue to repeat the theme or title (or words in the title) of the sermon throughout. But members have told me they have overheard

other congregational members in the parking lot ask their parent “What was the pastor’s sermon about?” or “I didn’t understand what the pastor was saying.” So self-assessing one’s introductions, transitions, illustrative material, and conclusions IS VITAL.

The Benefits of Receiving Feedback

During this researcher’s doctoral residency, she enjoyed a wonderful team of eight “evaluators” in a parish response group from her congregation. They each represented different demographics, interests, work, and history with the church. What they shared with this researcher will continue to be extremely valuable in my preaching ministry. Here are learnings from the experience:

- 1) God’s unconditional grace and love for everyone are messages they hear often and find comforting and challenging. They want to regularly hear God loves them.
- 2) The group appreciates learning more about the historical context of the Bible reading. Whenever I add context to the story, it brings the Gospel to life and allows them to connect the scripture to current events and their own lives. One man appreciates connections to local and global issues but also appreciates points of view emanating from people frequently overlooked in the biblical narrative.
- 3) They appreciate illustrations of Jesus' love and life with contemporary examples of people living in that way such as Archbishop Tutu, Martin Luther King Jr., or a student from our youth group. This helps them realize their connections with others (we are not alone) and reminds them of authentic and courageous brothers and sisters who are applying the lessons in their own lives.
- 4) The group from my congregation appreciates the “down-to-earthiness” of my messages. One man in particular hears, and appreciates very much, the

concentration on the common person and the problems/concerns of everyday living. He quoted a poem: “I’d rather SEE a sermon than hear one any day; I’d rather one would walk WITH me than merely tell the way.” Then he remembered a song he learned at church camp in 1954: “My God and I walk through the fields together, we walk and talk as good friends should and do.” He said THIS is his faith and it’s very simple and easy to understand. “THIS approach in your sermons is what makes them important to me: I can identify with your comments, understand them and believe in them.”

- 5) The parish response group appreciates sermons that raise provocative questions challenging their perspectives like sermons on racism. To see the cross and the lynching tree as metaphorical brothers—life made meaningful in the face of death and injustice—was powerful to them. The visuals Desmond Tutu shared of granting large nose people privileges rather than people with small noses, and having to explain to his daughter why she couldn’t play on the playground were memorable for them.
- 6) One woman on the parish response group said that during one of my sermons I got a little feisty comparing “overgenerous, altruistic, benevolent” with being “crusty, gruff, and ungracious” and she really snapped to and listened. She thought that on occasion a different tone would engage people in a different way.
- 7) The group appreciates visual images that can stay with them long after a sermon is preached. They pointed to the Acts 8 sermon connecting the Eunuch’s opening the door of the chariot with his openness to learning and the idea that strangers have something to teach us. The final visual showing God swinging the door

wide open was a bold reminder that God transcends all artificial human social and cultural boundaries.

- 8) They remembered a mantra from an Acts 1 sermon where the phrase “ends of the earth” repeated and became the end of the political or grocery store aisle, the end of the kitchen table, or the end of the driveway.
- 9) The team said that they feel I am one of them so when I give them a challenge, they know I am in the same circumstance with them. For example, being greedy was a topic they felt we shared together. “Instead of feeling like you were berating us, people responded by saying how can I change, Pastor Brenda?”
- 10) All of them said I tend to share too many examples (stories, research, book titles). When I focus on one theme with less “extras”, it's easier for them to take the message home.
- 11) The group felt that I have ramped up my vocabulary and engaging language.

Overall, here is what this researcher learned from having listeners evaluate her sermons.

- The preacher must work harder at identifying and developing a theme, staying with a main point, and minimizing the number of examples in stories and quotes.
- Going forward, some keys to engagement will be:
 - painting visual pictures when appropriate,
 - altering tone of voice and inflection,
 - continuing the use of metaphor and illustrative language, and
 - incorporating history and context of Biblical passages.

- Speaking in a down-to-earth way about everyday life challenges and preaching God's unconditional love and grace which the preacher does well should remain priorities.

Here are two comments this researcher received from parish response group members that suggest progress as a result of sermon assessment. "Our pastor has developed a sense of authority in the pulpit. The education she is receiving is, I believe, making her more of a perfect instrument for delivering the Word of God." "She obviously has more tools in her toolbox after residencies. She is trying new things and challenging herself."

Taking the Team's Advice

One of the most important learnings this researcher had in meeting with a parish response group after she preached a sermon was the feedback indicating that she needed to work at identifying and developing a theme. Staying with a main focus and minimizing the number of examples (stories, quotes, and illustrations) has to be a goal. With this in mind, she analyzed recent sermons to see if she had offered a clear and compelling message with a single theme.

In a Matthew 24:32-44 sermon on the Parable of the Fig Tree, this preacher moved from "How do we gift hope?" to "How does God gift hope?" Quick reflection: great through-line. However, the use of two very different visual images may have confused or distracted listeners. One image was of the fig tree from the preaching text and the other visual was of the disciples casting their fishing nets one more time. The images were examples of hope but the change in biblical texts was a tangent.

In my sermon on Luke 1:26-38 when Mary replies to the angel, I gave examples of people who have said "Let it be" and ways God says, "Let it be; trust me to have your

back.” Quick reflection: People were able to articulate in the parking lot after worship that we are encouraged to trust in God and what God is up to. Great!

A sermon on the Spirit of the Lord in Luke 4:14-21 was all about friendship love as part of a sermon series. I preached on how God uses friendship to bless and change the world. One of the take-a-ways people had was that while friendship can be good, it can also be bad if it means our friendships become exclusive or superior to other circles of friends.

In Luke 6:27-36, Jesus told us to love our enemies. I asked the question, “Do we love in all circumstances?” and then gave examples of God loving us. Quick reflection: Since the sermon began with a question “in all circumstances” I could have ended saying God loves us “in all circumstances,” praise be to God. This would have resulted in keeping the main focus through to the conclusion of the sermon.

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 is the sending of the seventy. The text offered an opportunity for this preacher to focus on wolves and the scripture passage about God giving us a Spirit of courage. Quick reflection: This preacher felt this sermon did not really work, although she did receive a broad positive response to the sermon. An aside comment: it would have been better to choose run and hide, or just hide. You don’t shrink because of a wolf.

A sermon on Luke 12:13-21 addressed greed. I talked about how we Americans love to store stuff and the danger of greed. I ended preaching about joy and riches that come from making God happy. Quick reflection: Good focus. The preacher could have done more with the man’s question to Jesus about inheritance since it is likely many in our congregation are dealing with issues of inheritances and related decisions.

Be ready was the theme in Luke 12:35-40. The sermon turned out to have a divided focus. The sermon featured stories about people returning home, and concluded with a picture about how we can be there for people in their transitions from dark to light. Quick reflection: This preacher was attempting a “readiness” theme and a “lamps lit” theme. The text did feature both, but choosing one would have helped listeners have a clear takeaway.

In a sermon on the Lost Sheep in Luke 15:1-10, the preacher focused on the beauty of lost sheep. I moved from stories of lost sheep in the Bible to the church being here for lost sheep. I concluded by saying the best shepherds are people who know what it’s like to have been lost and found by God. Quick reflection: Good focus.

The text in Luke 17:11-19 on the Ten Lepers offered this preacher an opportunity to talk about rescue. I began with Jesus rescue of the lepers, restoring them to community, and then moved to how we live now that we have been rescued by God. Quick reflection: I moved back and forth between a theme of healing and rescue. The sermon could have been strengthened by focusing on the word rescue and what that means.

A sermon on John 5:1-9 featured the paralytic by the pool. I began talking about a man without friends, how the church may not have befriended him, and then transitioned to a question about how might we be stuck on our mats? I concluded by saying that taking our mats with us can mean using our past experiences to befriend those who find themselves on the same mats. Quick reflection: Here again, the preacher has ended up with two focus areas: friendship and being stuck on mats. However, here two focus areas work because the mat in the end facilitates friendship.

John 8:31-36 was a Reformation text: If the Son makes you free, you are free indeed. So how do we live into this freedom? I talked about how life sometimes throws you curve balls and shared a story about golfers who learned to play the ball wherever the monkey dropped it. The sermon invited people to think about how they might use where they find themselves for God's good purposes. Quick reflection: The preacher received tons of comments, cards, and emails about how much the "monkey dropping the ball for golfers" meant to them. Golfers and non-golfers seemed to enjoy the story and felt it spoke to them as well as described their context at work or at home. This was an effective sermon in that the hearers "experienced" God's grace.

Jesus appears to his disciples in John 20:19-31. The sermon used "If, then" statements to describe how we negotiate with God and how God uses "If, then" statements with us. Feed my sheep was the final commission. Quick reflection: Good focus but in reviewing the sermon, the preacher could have incorporated "grace" metaphors to support the mantra.

Acts 1:1-8 presented the preacher with an opportunity to talk about our witness in the world. The sermon focused on what it means for us to take the "inclusive" Gospel to the ends of the earth today in our context. And then, finally, what does God's "inclusiveness" mean for us. Quick reflection: Home run! Consistent focus, function, and take-a-way. The sermon was God-focused and contextual. Listeners still refer to the sermon.

As I consider a year's worth of messages, the themes that emerge are grace, inclusivity, love and service. This makes sense because these focus areas are pillars of our congregation and they were worship themes this past year.

Summary

Luchetti said that working on your craft and reading preaching books demonstrates your commitment to learn how to preach better. He said it also demonstrates “you are crazy or, to put it more mildly, daring enough to believe that the God of the universe might show up through the preacher’s sacrament of words to transform people to transform the world. You are committed and courageous. A fruitful preaching life is impossible without this crucial combination of characteristics.”¹

Yes, pastor-preachers are crazy. We’re crazy in love with our God and with God’s Word. We know much is at stake which is why so many of us work hard at our craft. Pew’s research showed that people looking for a church home value good preaching most of all.² Similarly, Gallup concluded that the number one reason people remain at a church is the quality of the sermons.³ The lesson is clear: if you want to grow your church and feed the flock in front of you, good preaching must be a top priority. Pastor-preachers are not living up to their God-given callings if they don’t invest time and effort in their preaching.

Over time we will develop effective habits for staying alert to how God is working and speaking in our contexts, learning new strategies for honing our craft, and taking a hard look at our already preached sermons. There lie precious secrets to our

¹ Luchetti, *Preaching Essentials* 11.

² “Choosing a New Church or House of Worship,” Pew Research Center, August 23, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/08/23/choosing-a-new-church-or-house-of-worship/> (accessed 1/15/2019).

³ Joshua Pease, “Gallup Research: What Keeps People Coming Back to Church Week after Week Isn’t the Cool Music,” April 27, 2017, <https://churchleaders.com/news/302891-gallup-research-keeps-people-coming-back-church-week-week-isn’t-cool-music.html>, (accessed 1/15/2019).

future success as we grow more faithful to the task of preaching and lean into our call to serve God's people with the best we have to offer.

“Going up the mountain to encounter God through the biblical text in order to come down into the preaching event with something life-giving for God's people is quite an adventurous vocation. Can there be anything more exhilarating, frightening, and risky than the practice of preaching?”⁴

Recall why you preach. What are your compelling reasons for doing this work day in and day out? Think about how preaching has changed your life and the lives of others. Remember “that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

Finally, take effervescent joy in the God who speaks through you and raise your expectations for the church that called you. As each preacher becomes more effective in biblical preaching, the wider church benefits. More deeply engaged preachers and faithfully prepared and assessed sermons have the potential to set the hearts and lives on fire of those who grace our church-at-large. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the results, will be more worshippers living out their faith in community, a growing number of candidates inspired for pastoral ministry, and a world changed for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

⁴ Luchetti, *Preaching Essentials* 13.

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