

The Art of Preaching

Licensing School

May 17, 2024 • The Rev. Brent Levy

“People listen to people
who listen to them.”

The Rev. Dr. Susan Eastman

Preaching is relational.

- name
- context in which you'll find yourself preaching
- **three words** that describe how you arrive today

It is a life-draining deception to ever believe that one preaches alone. Of course, one voice speaks in the preaching, yet at every moment, at any given moment when a preacher speaks, many preachers past and present are speaking. The preacher is always a company of preachers.

The Rev. Dr. Willie James Jennings

Who's in your pulpit?

- one preacher who has shaped your preaching, and why
- one sermon that has stuck with you, and why
- one challenge or fear that you have

"Introduction to Poetry" by Billy Collins

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

"Introduction to Poetry" by Billy Collins

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the
shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

"Introduction to Poetry" by Billy Collins

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

"Introduction to *Preaching*" by Anna Carter Florence
inspired by Billy Collins

I ask my students to take a biblical text like Mark 1:4-6,
or press an ear against its hive
to hear John the Baptizer's ranting,
and the people moaning,
and the waters of the Jordan beneath a buzzing of
locusts.

"Introduction to *Preaching*" by Anna Carter Florence
inspired by Billy Collins

I say drop a teenager into the Song of Songs
and watch her probe her way out of her Britney Spears
reality
into another world where her rounded thighs are like
jewels,
and her belly is a heap of wheat encircled with lilies,
and she is beautiful and perfect in the body God gave her.

"Introduction to *Preaching*" by Anna Carter Florence
inspired by Billy Collins

I say walk inside Jacob's tent the morning after he was married to Leah,
and feel around for a light switch
so you can pay attention to their eyes (was there surprise?)
as their retinas confirm
what their hands have already told them under the veil of night.

"Introduction to *Preaching*" by Anna Carter Florence
inspired by Billy Collins

I want my students to water ski over the surface of Romans 8,
waving to the community of faith on shore, and calling,
"Yippee! Did you hear that?!"
'No condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!'"

What is Preaching?

- Proclaiming the Gospel
 - "But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" — Romans 10:14-15
 - "I mean by preaching the gospel, preaching the love of God to sinners, preaching the life, death, resurrection, and intercession of Christ, with all the blessings which, in consequence thereof, are freely given to true believers..." — John Wesley

What is Preaching?

- Teaching
 - explaining Scripture using scholarly sources and tradition
 - teaching about spiritual disciplines and traditions of the church
 - helping people make sense of the world and their place in it
- Inspiration and Encouragement
 - offering hope, possibility, promise
 - call to action, to service, to faithfulness, to repentance

What is Preaching?

- Witness
 - ways we've seen the presence of God in the world

What is Preaching?

Adam Hamilton's "Five Aims of Preaching"

- evangelism
- discipleship
- equipping and sending
- pastoral care
- institutional development

"Preaching is more than art or science. It is alchemy, in which tin becomes gold... under the influence of the Holy Spirit."

Barbara Brown Taylor

"Preaching is a profound act of human connection and intimacy."

Christine Smith

Why does preaching matter?

How do we begin?

A sermon must begin with **the text**

- Two primary ways of identifying Scripture text
 - Lectionary
 - Sermon Series

Lectionary

- The lectionary is a calendar of scripture readings appointed for Christian worship on specific days of the year
- Two primary lectionaries
 - Revised Common Lectionary: three-year cycle of Scripture readings used for Sunday worship services by most mainline Protestant traditions
 - Narrative Lectionary: launched in 2010 by Luther Seminary, seeks to provide a more cohesive narrative of Scripture

Revised Common Lectionary

- four readings each week: Old Testament, Psalm, Epistle (or other NT reading), Gospel
- three-year cycle with a different focus Gospel each year
- new year begins on the First Sunday of Advent
- What year are we in now?

Narrative Lectionary

- four-year cycle, runs from September through May
- one primary Scripture passage per week
- each year highlights a different Gospel, and each week includes accompanying texts that complement the main narrative
- summers focus on one book of the Bible at a time or a particular theme or practice
 - this summer: The Lord's Prayer, 1 John, Daniel

What are some advantages and disadvantages of using the lectionary?

Sermon Series

- becoming much more common in Protestant churches
- allow for greater depth around a theme, topic, idea, book, or another resource

What are some advantages and disadvantages of using a sermon series?

Any questions so far?

From Scripture to Sermon

- We have our text... Now what?
- The Rev. Dr. Jerusha Neal's *Overshadowed Preacher: Mary, the Spirit, and the Labor of Proclamation*
 - Conceiving
 - Bearing
- exegesis = "to lead out"
 - the process of spending time with, studying, researching, and interpreting the passage to **lead out** the meaning that the Spirit has for you

Conceiving, Bearing, Naming

- This is the beginning of your engagement with the text
- Before you turn to any commentaries or Google or ChatGPT... this is the work of opening yourself to the Word
- Find ways to creatively engage with the text that goes beyond sitting in your office

Conceiving, Bearing, Naming

Guiding Practices for Conceiving

- Find words that shimmer
- Identify questions that arise out of the text for you
- Notice what you feel when you read it
- Act it out
- Write the passage out by hand
- Dislocate it

Conceiving, Bearing, Naming

Guiding Practices for Conceiving

- Rewrite the passage in your own words
- Create a picture
- Memorize it
- Other ideas?

"Every preacher has a different routine for preparing a sermon. My own begins with a long sitting spell with an open Bible on my lap as I read and read and read the text. What I am hunting for is the God in it."

Barbara Brown Taylor

Conceiving, **Bearing**, Naming

- Beginning to develop the heart of the sermon
- A laborious process!
- Bringing your passage into conversation with:
 - the broader Biblical narrative by situating the passage in context
 - your congregation by considering *their* context, needs, hopes, etc.
 - scholars, theologians, and saints through Biblical commentaries

Conceiving, **Bearing**, Naming

The Broader Biblical Narrative

- Read *around* the passage
- What type of literature is it?
- How does it function in the broader scope of the book or the Bible as a whole?
- Note the differences in different translations.

Conceiving, **Bearing**, Naming

Your Congregation's Context

- What questions might *they* be asking?
- What are the pastoral care concerns? What's going on in the congregation?
- What's going on in the world that may be top of mind for them?
- Who else are you bringing into conversation with you? What are some of the larger conversations happening where you are?

Conceiving, **Bearing**, Naming

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Conceiving, **Bearing**, Naming

Biblical Commentaries

- Only *after* you've spent time with the text!
- Helpful in filling in the gaps and making connections that you may not have known or seen otherwise
- Helpful in bringing nuance to questions that you've started to ask
- Helpful in bringing diverse voices and experiences beyond your own/

Conceiving, **Bearing**, Naming

Biblical Commentaries

- New Interpreter's Bible Commentary
- Feasting on the Word
- _____ for Everyone Series
- Interpretation series
- Others?

Conceiving, **Bearing**, Naming

Biblical Commentaries

- Some websites have some good resources, too
 - textweek.com
 - workingpreacher.org
 - The Bible Project
 - *Christian Century*

Any questions so far?

Conceiving, Bearing, **Naming**

What is the Good News?

- Three Ways of Naming
 - Jerusha Neal: Wound and Promise
 - Lisa Cressman: The Heart of the Message
 - Tom Long: Focus and Function

Conceiving, Bearing, **Naming**

Jerusha Neal: Wound and Promise

- **Wound:** Where is the place of sin, human frailty/brokenness, or suffering in the text? In what ways does it expose the pain and injustice in their lives?
- **Promise:** What is God doing to heal the wound? Where do you see God's faithfulness, grace, and power at work?

Conceiving, Bearing, **Naming**

Lisa Cressman: The Heart of the Message

- What is the Good News I believe? (Belief Statement)
- Why does it matter that listeners believe this Good News? (Hope Statement)
- What keeps us from believing this Good News? (The Human Condition)
- What does God want us to say 'yes' to? (Invitation to Transformation)
- Bumper Sticker: What's the heart of the message in one sentence that could be used on a bumper sticker?

Conceiving, Bearing, **Naming**

Tom Long: Focus and Function

- Focus Statement: What is the text saying? What is the one-sentence summary of what this passage is saying to my congregation? What do I want them to walk away with?
- Function Statement: So what? How will this Good News *function* in the lives of my hearers? What is God calling them to do as a result?
 - "So, go and..."

Based on the sermons you preached today, identify the promise, heart, or focus.

Embodying the Word: A Conversation

or, cooking up something good

- What images, styles, and stories might best communicate the promise, heart, and focus to these particular hearers at this particular time in this particular place?
- How does this Word become embodied in a way that is authentic to you and your context?
- Ingredients to Consider:
 - Who's in your congregation?
 - What's going on in the world?
 - What style should this sermon take?
 - What stories will resonate?

Embodying the Word: A Conversation

Who's in your congregation?

- age and generation
- race and culture
- education level
- theological or doctrinal background
- history

Embodying the Word: A Conversation

What's going on in the world?

- Are there big community, national, or international events?
- Question: What is the role of politics in the pulpit?

Embodying the Word: A Conversation

What style should the sermon take?

- Prophetic
- Poetic
- Didactic
- Epistolary
- First-Person

Embodying the Word: A Conversation

What stories will resonate?

- From the world around you
 - caveat: always cite your sources
- Pop culture
 - caveat: context is important

Embodying the Word: A Conversation

What stories will resonate?

- Personal experiences
 - caveat: always get permission
 - caveat: don't bleed on your congregation
 - caveat: don't be the hero
 - caveat: vary your illustrations
- pro-tip: Get a bucket

Embodying the Word: A Conversation

Put them into conversation

- mind mapping
- talking it out
- journal
- use index cards
- others?

My Sermon Flow

- a way in: a story or illustration that introduces a metaphor
- introduction of the Biblical narrative
- the zoom in
- the payoff
- the commission

Any questions so far?

So what form should your sermon take?

Manuscript
Advantages & Disadvantages

Outline
Advantages & Disadvantages

No Notes
Advantages & Disadvantages

Dialogical / Conversational
Advantages & Disadvantages

Where have you seen this done well?
Where have you seen this done poorly?

Which form are you most comfortable
with? Which would you like to try?

Delivery

Prophesy to the Bones!

- Pay attention to your tone
- Make eye contact
- Use facial expressions (that match the content you're preaching)
- Practice!
- Find a mirror (or record yourself)
- Seek honest feedback

Delivery

Prophesy to the Bones!

- Watch how other people talk
- others?

What have I missed?

Brent's Top Ten Preaching Tips

1. Sermon preparation must begin and end with prayer.

2. Find your latch.

3. People can only hold about three things at a time.

4. You don't have to say everything.
You just have to say something.

5. Tidy bows aren't necessary.

6. Find a preaching buddy.

7. Start early.

8. Don't apologize.

9. No one has ever complained about a sermon being too short.

10. It's not up to you.

A blessing for you...
