

*Surviving the Sermon Preparation Process**

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Preaching a sermon is relatively easy. Preparing one worth preaching is what is difficult. Like Elijah in the cave, we wait for the Divine voice. We look everywhere for the Word. Often, the more we look the less we find.

Through the years I have been given advice at great length—told *where* to look for sermon possibilities: through disciplined Bible study, in my pastoral experience, on my knees, at the theatre, in the paper, in my lying down and my rising up.

Now, of course, we have the lectionary—look there. But the problem remains, for, alas, the issue is not *where*—it is *what*. Would we be instructed by the p. s. attached to the bottom of that very old recipe for rabbit soup: “First, you catch a rabbit”? Partly, but unfortunately, that advice won’t quite suffice either. The issue is not simply that of catching the homiletical rabbit. The issue is whether you can *intentionally* and *inadvertently* allow the rabbit to catch you. And that is what this brief essay is about—how to intentionally and inadvertently allow the homiletical rabbit to *catch us*.

I venture this in spite of my long-held suspicion—a suspicion lacking incontrovertible evidence to be sure—that most folks who tell others how to get started in the sermon preparation process either do not really know how it is that they do it, or they do not seem to follow their own advice. The issue is, after all, the most elusive part of the homiletical art, and clearly the hardest to teach. Most of us know several options regarding the shaping of a sermon—if *only we had something to shape*.

You remember that moment, when someone close to you steps into the middle of your sermon preparation with: “How are you doing for Sunday?” You respond: “Not well. Nothing seems to be happening.” Later the person returns with the same question—and out of an entirely different world you exclaim: “I think I have something!” (It probably would be more accurate to say that something *has you*.) But the inquirer is not content—wants more data: “What is it that you have?” Your initial reaction is to ask the person to leave, and quickly, because your only honest reply would be “I don’t really know yet, but something *is working*.”

Our question here, then, is simply: How does one prompt, tease, evoke, claim, provoke, or facilitate that uncertain certainty: “I think I have something”? Actually, we will take the matter one step further, asking—once we arrive at that moment: How can we *keep alive* that almost euphoric epistemological experience before it turns to pale platitude? How do we live with it in the context of further preparation? For our purposes here, we will presume that the preacher begins with a text—lectionary or otherwise. The preparation process begins, obviously, by gaining an effective familiarity with the text to be utilized. Otherwise form will not follow function. This “effective familiarity” involves a peculiar blend of knowledge and mystery, of grasping and being grasped, of managing and being led. It is easier to say what it is

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not than what it is—although most of us know when it is happening well.

Numerous traps await the preacher in the preparation process, traps which hide homiletical rabbits and often prevent those preliminary “ah ha” experiences that forecast productive homiletical work. Several traps can be identified easily. In exploring several traps to be avoided we will attempt also to identify techniques that might prove helpful in successfully surviving the preparation process.

Because the first task in sermon preparation is to *listen to the text*, it is important not to be upstaged by expert helpers who will give us answers to questions we have yet even to ask. I believe too many preachers (lectionary followers in particular) turn much too quickly from a first reading of the text to brief commentaries so easily available. I am not quarreling with exegetical assistance. Indeed, without it, text turns to pre-text and what might have been biblical preaching turns into manipulative topical preaching. Exegetical assistance is an indispensable part of biblical preaching. But its time is not now.

Since our first task is *hearing*, it is important to position ourselves in such a way that we can be open to listen. Our intention to “get a sermon” is commendable—and inevitable, for Sunday is fast approaching. Yet, our task at this early moment in the preparation process should be to set aside our intentionality in favor of that possibility of inadvertent surprise. We already have enough trouble imposing our own agenda onto a text. Right now, let’s not impose others’ agenda either. Instead, I suggest we read the text out loud, repeatedly—and in as many differing translations and paraphrases as we have available. It is particularly helpful to read the text in the original language if possible, not yet for purposes of exegetical scrutiny, but for the purpose of hearing. I suggest delaying word study at this point—unless something jumps out and slaps us in the face. Right now we are trying to be impacted by the *whole*. Dissecting the parts will come later.

In short, at this moment in the process we need to find behavior that will keep us *out* of the driver’s seat. Our present concern is to be *accosted*, *confronted*. Does this mean that all we can do is to wait around prayerfully and quietly for the Word to drop by? I think not. There is something we can *do* which by its nature can help keep us out of the driver’s seat and assist the possibility of our being confronted. *We can look for trouble*.

What is there about the text that does not seem to fit? Is there anything strange here? “Ideological suspicion” does not always feel comfortable for us, particularly when we are included in its object. But “suspicion” in its positive sense of *probing uncertainty* is precisely what can be helpful here. *Trouble*, in, around, with, and about the text is often the occasion for a fresh hearing. In leading lectionary workshops, I often ask the participants to gather in small groups and look for what is *weird* in a passage. Anything is helpful at this point if it breaks us loose from the usual, the easily accepted, the routine and timid truth that will not change lives.

Sometimes the “trouble” will not show itself until we have read the previous two chapters of the text—and the following chapter as well. Our particular text, after all, did not come out of a vacuum. Its placement in the biblical sweep was the result of someone’s conscious strategy.

We are looking for trouble, for textual issues. As we are confronted by them we then begin—like any good detective—to research them. But, looking for trouble needs to come first. After textual issues begin to be named, *then* such measures as word

study, introductions to the book as found in commentaries, comparisons with parallel or conflicting passages—all the resources of solid exegetical work—are in order. Now we are on the kind of trail for disclosure that has life and vitality.

But note the difference between exploring a text to find its *answer* and exploring a text to pursue its *question*. The first puts us in command. The second, while prompting similar exegetical work, positions us as *investigator* rather than as *explainer*. Instead of placing us in a nice tidy little circle with God and the text as over against the listeners, we become the first listener.

In all of this we are headed toward the first major moment in the sermon preparation process, which is to answer the question: *What is the focus of the text?*

The question of *focus* is born out of the need to know what is at stake here, what were the biblical issues that needed to be addressed in the first place. Now, sometimes the biblical text does not appear to name a specific issue, but rather contains a fairly straightforward declaration of some kind. This means the preacher needs to look before and after the specific text in order to find the focus—or perhaps, look imaginatively to the anticipated reaction of the original receivers, or even next Sunday's congregation. When the preacher's early preparation work on a sermon concentrates on *focus*, or question or issue or trouble, the text can emerge in a kind of juxtaposed form. That is, the textual exploration may include *both* issue *and* resolution—generally one explicitly and the other implicitly. It is the preacher's holistic moment of insight that grasps *both* issue and resolution together (sometimes at an intuitive level of thought) that produces that euphoric epistemological experience to begin with. *Perceived connection* between issue and resolution is the key to that uncertain certainty. The *connection* prompts the excitement—and alerts the preacher that something is happening—even if not yet quite nameable.

On the other hand, when the biblical question is put in the form of resolutorial language: "What is the message of the text?" it is likely that no excitement of juxtaposition will occur. When the biblical question is put in *focus* language: "What is the issue here?" chances increase that an explicit question may get linked with an implicit answer or an explicit answer may get linked with an implicit question. And one increases greatly the chance of being able to say: "I think I've got something." Otherwise put, *how* one asks biblical questions is instrumental in determining whether the preacher or the text is doing the driving.

No doubt you have already noticed that I did not suggest the formulation of a theme sentence—which is the more usual advice. Why not?

The reasons are multiple, and involve further preparation traps that need to be avoided. First, however, we need to note the important goal that the theme sentence attempts to accomplish. I see its primary goal as providing precision of homiletical purpose. Indeed, through the years I have heard altogether too many sermons (some of them mine) that have wandered all over God's creation looking for a place to land. Sometimes the preacher's desperation (and the listener's as well) can be resolved only by a lengthy closing summary prayer.

Homiletical precision is, of course, required. The question is how to achieve it. Although often recommended as the answer, theme sentences also provide potential problems.

First, a theme sentence tends to propositionalize the sermon. Often the sermon goal becomes narrowed to an educational aim—to inform, to clarify, to apply, to

amplify. And then we measure our success in terms of having “gotten *it* across,” a very telling phrase. It is too often the case that in the preparation process, the sooner we settle on a theme, the quicker and more likely the sermon can settle on becoming a report.

Second, except in unusual hands, the theme sentence often has the effect of turning off the mind. The simple reason is that it names next Sunday’s event in terms of *resolution*. Lost is the *torque of juxtaposition*. My experience is that most students who operate with the use of a theme sentence operate deductively as soon as the theme sentence is named. The probing sense of inquiry is lessened, the focus narrowed to “thoughtful and careful” articulation of an *informational message*.

Now, obviously, this does not always happen. There are those who can utilize the technique with fine effect—but generally they are those whose thinking is wonderfully weird, who are able to see resolution and yet still keep the doors of the mind open. For many, the comfort of resolution is too good to set aside for further engagement of an issue.

Those who suggest a thematic statement in the sermon preparation process often place it exactly between biblical work and sermon formation. The unintended result is to divide the work, with the whole process unwittingly imagined as an hourglass on its side—with biblical work narrowing toward the thematic sentence, which then opens into sermon formation. I believe this to be an unnecessary, even counterproductive, division of labor. The context of sermon formation is often the propitious time for exegetical labor, just as the shape of a biblical text itself can be instructive toward the eventual form of the sermon.

How often it has been true for me that if I had to write a theme statement, I would be unable to name it until almost the end of the preparation process. Moreover, once a theme sentence is produced, the preacher tends to move into the driver’s seat and take charge. In short, we need to maximize our capacity to keep open throughout the preparation process. The theme sentence seems not to encourage that openness for most preachers I have had occasion to observe at close range.

Given the need for precision of purpose, and given the problems argued here, I propose the *focus* sentence rather than the *theme* sentence. I have found it quite remarkable how once the issue is named with some precision, further major questions of the sermon-to-be fall into place. Once the *issue* is named crisply, the sermonic *aim* gains focus.

My choice in asking for the *naming of a sermonic aim* is quite deliberate. To perceive the matter as looking for a sermonic *message*, for example, is too restrictive. What I need to know is: What do I hope will *happen* as a result of this sermon—not what is its theme, or message, or point. And with clarity about focus or issue, the aim becomes more easily nameable.

Likewise, when at one end of the anticipated sermonic process I can state the issue, and at the other the sermonic aim, I am in a better position to figure out what is needed to traverse the gap in between. In other words, I am ready to discover the fundamental *turn* of the sermon. Otherwise put: How can the Gospel effect the transformation of issue to resolution?

Sometimes, the preparation process does not move from focus to aim to turn—sometimes it moves from focus to *turn* to aim (which more nearly resembles the completed sermon). That is, once the issue is named, biblical and other theological

work may reveal “from out of the blue” what in fact the sermon really ought to accomplish. In whatever order the second and third major moments in sermon preparation occur, focus almost always comes first.

So it is that the major difference between my advice and that of others in imagining preliminary sermon preparation work is clear. I attempt to achieve the important goal of precision by how I ask the sermonic *question* rather than by how I state the sermonic *answer*.

We began our consideration of sermon preparation by means of an image of the “homiletical rabbit,” asking just how we can intentionally and inadvertently allow the rabbit to catch us. Changing the metaphor, the question became one of how to stay out of the driver’s seat while planning our sermon preparation process. The issue has to do with authority and control. Advising anyone to “stay open” may seem like the advice to “be spontaneous now.” Although it is difficult for a person to decide to stay open in preparation work, there are behaviors that by their nature lean us toward openness and others that will lead us toward control. My proposal is to move toward a focus statement rather than a theme sentence in order to maximize the chances of remaining open to hear the text.

To be sure, survival in sermon preparation is difficult for all. The bottom line finally is not the question of whether we survived. The big question is: Did the rabbit survive?