

TO PREACH THE GOOD NEWS

A HANDBOOK
ABOUT PREACHING
FOR PRESBYTERIANS
IN CANADA

SARAH TRAVIS



The Presbyterian
Church in Canada

**To Preach the Good News:
A Handbook about Preaching for Presbyterians in Canada**

Writer: Sarah Travis

Editor: Anne Saunders

Editorial consultants: Emily Bisset and Joon Ki Kim

Copy editor: Sue Dyrkton

Design: Tim Faller Design, Inc.

Every effort has been made to trace copyrights on the materials included in this resource. If any copyrighted material has nevertheless been included without permission and due acknowledgement, proper credit will be inserted in future printings after notice has been received. Unless otherwise noted, biblical references are from the New Revised Standard version of the Bible, © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Permission is granted for congregations and individuals to photocopy material in this resource for educational purposes. They are asked to credit the source.

A resource produced by Canadian Ministries

© The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 2016
50 Wynford Drive, Toronto, ON M3C 1J7

PRINTED IN CANADA

About the author

Sarah Travis is an ordained minister of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, and holds a Doctor of Theology in Preaching from Knox College, University of Toronto. She serves as the Minister-in-Residence at Knox College, where she also teaches courses in the area of preaching and worship. Sarah is the author of *Decolonizing Preaching: The Pulpit as Postcolonial Space* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014). She is married to Paul Miller, and they live in Oakville, Ontario, with their three children: Ben, Ella and Olive.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

The call to preach	6
Ordained ministers, elders or lay	6
<i>Lay ministry</i>	6
Developing a sermon preparation method	7
<i>Classic Presbyterian sermons</i>	7
How to use this resource	8
<i>Timely advice</i>	8

PART A – Background to Preaching a Sermon

Chapter One – The History of Preaching

In the New Testament and early church	10
In the tradition of the church	10
Recent developments	11

Chapter Two – Preaching as a Task of Christian Ministry

Preaching as a conversation	12
Preachers as ambassadors	13
Role of the Holy Spirit	13
<i>Preaching is alchemy</i>	13
In relationship with God	14
<i>Why do we preach?</i>	14

PART B – Preparing to Preach

Chapter Three – Experiencing the Good News

What is the good news?	16
<i>The gospel's "peculiar speech"</i>	17
Preaching the good news	17
<i>Spiritual disciplines</i>	18
Beginning with the Bible	18

Chapter Four – Listening to God and God’s Creation

Listening to God	19
Listening to yourself	19
<i>Divine grace and human skill</i>	20
Listening to other preachers	20
<i>Warning!</i>	20
Listening to the worshipping community	20
Listening locally and globally	21

PART C – Preparing a Sermon

Chapter Five – Choosing Scripture

The Revised Common Lectionary	23
<i>How to use a lectionary</i>	24
<i>Current lectionary readings</i>	25
Liturgical or church year calendar	25
<i>Liturgical calendar and themes</i>	25
Theme-based sermons	26
<i>Non-liturgical calendar and themes</i>	26
<i>Some national and international special days and themes</i>	27

Chapter Six – Analyzing Scripture

A six-step process	28
<i>Biblical exegesis</i>	29
<i>English translations of the Bible</i>	30
<i>The passage and a predetermined theme</i>	31

Chapter Seven – Analyzing the Congregation

<i>Congregational exegesis</i>	33
Guiding questions	34
<i>Fruitful texts</i>	34

Chapter Eight – Articulating the Focus

Discerning	35
God’s message for this sermon	36
Narrowing the focus	36
<i>A thesis statement</i>	37

Chapter Nine – Developing the Outline	
Inductive and deductive sermons	38
Patterns	39
<i>Pattern One: Four Sections</i>	39
<i>Pattern Two: Plain Style</i>	39
<i>Pattern Three: Three Points and a Poem</i>	40
Planning what you want to say	40
<i>Creating visual outlines</i>	40
Chapter Ten – Writing the Sermon	
Putting yourself “out there”	42
Length	42
<i>How long and how many words?</i>	42
Coherence	42
Action words and imagery	42
Revision	43
<i>Strong writing</i>	43
Chapter Eleven – Delivering Sermons	
Sermon notes	44
Eye contact	45
Voice	45
Energy and enthusiasm	45
Technology	46
Chapter Twelve – Evaluating Sermons	
Learning from mistakes	47
<i>Failures or successes?</i>	47
Evaluation forms	48
Opportunities to improve	48
<i>Evaluation Form A – For preachers</i>	49
<i>Evaluation Form B – For worshippers</i>	50
CONCLUSION	
A preacher’s blessing	51
APPENDIX – Preaching Practice:	
Reflections and resources for individuals and groups	
Eight reflections with suggested readings	52
Recommended study Bibles, commentaries and websites	56

INTRODUCTION

The call to preach

I have been preaching for fifteen years, ten of those as an ordained minister. While the idea of public speaking once caused me a lot of anxiety, I no longer get nervous before delivering a sermon. Yet, every Sunday morning I wake up and ask myself, “Why me?” I wonder why I am the person chosen to speak such important words to this congregation. Even as the task of preparing and delivering sermons has become more familiar, preaching continues to be a challenge and an awe-inspiring privilege.

In today’s world with multi-tasking, shorter attention spans and a preference for visual learning, those of us standing in the pulpit sometimes wonder if public preaching is still relevant. Might the love of Christ be communicated more fully by action rather than by words? What is the point of just talking about God? Yet, I believe that the God who has called us into relationship with one another has also called us to listen together for God’s Word, and to reflect together on what God is doing in the world. To stand in front of friends and family and strangers, to look them in the eyes and to speak aloud about faith and hope and love, *that* is a Christian practice that we believe is still valued even in the digital age. Preaching is a unique means of communication and the sermon continues to be an important feature of Christian worship.

If you are reading this, you are likely feeling a call to preaching. You may experience this calling as an interest in learning how to preach or how to improve your preaching; you may have been invited to preach or perhaps you have already preached many sermons. Friends or your minister may have identified gifts and talents in you that you want to develop, or maybe you’ve been wondering if you have the ability to stand in front of others and talk about your faith. Whatever your reason for picking up this resource, it is my hope that you will learn something about the history and practice

of Christian preaching that will affirm your abilities, develop your skills and create or renew a passion for the amazing power of the spoken word. At the very least, if this resource helps you gain a better understanding of the practice of preaching, then you might become a better listener in worship and get more out of the sermons preached by others.

Ordained ministers, elders or lay

One does not have to be an ordained minister or elder to be a preacher. In The Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC) we believe we are

LAY MINISTRY

“As Presbyterians, we affirm that Christ calls all Christians to participate in his ministry in the world and gives each one gifts to do so. In church, we help one another learn how to receive and use God’s gifts faithfully. Responding to the gracious love of God, we serve in the name of Christ in our homes and families, in our neighbourhoods, in our workplaces, in our church communities and in the world.” – “Ministerial Lay Staff,” *Acts & Proceedings*, (The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 2008), 349-353.

all participants in God's mission to the world. However, it is important that we equip ourselves to do the ministry to which we are called. Few people have the ability to stand up and preach life-changing sermons without putting time and energy into training and preparation. Good preaching is hard work; it requires a set of skills that must be nurtured and practiced. Since this is a resource to help all preachers in our church – clergy and non-clergy – it has been assumed that the reader has had no formal theological training. However, it would be helpful for the reader to be familiar with worship in congregations of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Developing a sermon preparation method

There is no one-size-fits-all model for preparing sermons. Over time, a preacher may experiment to learn which method works best for them. In Part C of this handbook, different stages of sermon preparation are considered – from choosing the scriptural text and a theme or focus, to creating a conclusion. It addresses how to choose which scripture to preach; how to create a sermon that brings a message of good news to the worshippers; how to develop an outline and organize the content so there is a beginning, middle and end; and how to write and present a sermon that is interesting and relevant.

The suggestions presented are consistent with the preparation of what Presbyterians sometimes call the “classic sermon.” This refers to the kind of basic consensus position developed by Presbyterian preachers in England, Scotland and the New World, beginning in the late 16th and early 17th centuries.

CLASSIC PRESBYTERIAN SERMONS

Preaching is the act of proclaiming the gospel with all its words of judgment and of grace. This is done through explaining the biblical narrative, reflecting on what it means in biblical and theological terms, and pointing the listeners to connections between their lives and the biblical text. Classic Presbyterian sermons contained three basic elements:

1. “Opening” or understanding the biblical text itself. What are the contextual, linguistic and interpretive features that are essential for understanding the text? It is important to note that Presbyterian preaching has always been rooted in an exposition of scripture.
2. “Dividing” or theologically reflecting on the text. Where does it fit into the larger doctrine and understanding of Christian faith?
3. “Application” or “uses” of the text. What does the text have to say for us today? Application was the most important part and, as can be expected, the most controversial depending on how the preacher was applying the text and its teaching to the particulars of his/her time and place. But application was also the climax of the sermon, without which no sermon was complete.

Classic Presbyterian sermons at their best were very structured and substantial in terms of content. Preachers expected a lot of mental focus from their hearers. There was a lot to teach! They also guarded against two extremes: 1) preaching that was spontaneous and extemporaneous, without structure, without much content or depth, aimed simply at the emotional level of the hearer; and 2) preaching that was sophisticated, intellectual, witty and entertaining, without being clear, practical and spiritually engaging.

– *Together in Ministry: The Theology and Practice of Ministry in The Presbyterian Church in Canada* (2004), 55.

As you become more familiar with preparing sermons, you will develop your own method – a method that works best for you given your own style, time constraints and preferences. There are many, many ways to prepare a sermon. This resource draws on what some of the most experienced preachers have determined to be “best practices.”

Juggling preaching responsibility with the other demands of your life takes planning and time. Sermon preparation requires time to

- let the Holy Spirit work through you (Chapter Two)
- choose the scripture passage(s) (Chapter Five)
- reflect on and analyze scripture (Chapters Three, Six)
- research relevant ideas, themes, stories (Chapters Four, Seven)
- discern the sermon’s main message (Chapters Four, Eight)
- write, and rewrite, the outline (Chapter Nine) and then the sermon (Chapter Ten)
- practice sermon delivery (Chapter Eleven)
- evaluate and revise the sermon (Chapter Twelve)
- organize research and evaluation notes for future reference (Chapter Twelve)

Timely Advice

Begin sermon preparation early. To some, this may mean prepare one week ahead; to others, it could mean several weeks as they look forward to a whole season or sequence of sermons. This is especially vital for a novice preacher developing skills. Early preparation helps to lower stress and produce better sermons. However, at all stages of a preacher’s career, the act of setting aside sufficient time to write sermons is an act of faithfulness – to one’s calling to serve God and God’s people as best one can.

How to use this resource

This handbook has been organized into 12 chapters. It is designed to be flexible. You can work through the material on your own or with a group of people who share your interest in preaching. The latter might provide opportunities to share personal faith stories, learn from others’ experiences and to practice preaching in front of others. There is also an appendix with suggested reflections and resources.

A detailed Table of Contents has been provided so readers can go directly to the section of greatest interest and urgency. In addition, readers are reminded that in this age of information and communication technology, almost daily there is something new available on this subject – for instance, the publication of a new book or journal article, or the online posting of a new blog, podcast or video. The websites that appear in this resource are reliable at the time of publication. As these change and new ones are discovered, inform Canadian Ministries at 1-800-619-7301 or canadianministries@presbyterian.ca. Also regularly check the worship page of The Presbyterian Church in Canada <http://presbyterian.ca/worship> to find new recommended sources of information on preaching.

PART A

BACKGROUND TO PREACHING A SERMON



THE HISTORY OF PREACHING

Preaching has a long, rich and diverse history. The following sections highlight some of the developments and changes in preaching over the centuries. For a detailed history, refer to suggested readings in Reflection One in the Appendix.

In the New Testament and early church

We are so accustomed to the printed word that it is easy to forget that in biblical times oral communication was the norm. When John the Baptist called out in the wilderness and when Jesus taught, they were preaching: they spoke about God. After Jesus' death and resurrection, his disciples preached: they told others about what they had witnessed in Jesus Christ. The church grew as the apostles and those who followed them preached to different groups in different places.

We stand in that same tradition, although we inhabit a different culture. Christians were not the first or the only people to use public speech to spread a message. There was preaching in the Jewish synagogues; and in the Greco-Roman world, “rhetoric” was a carefully structured method of public speaking and argument. Christian preaching developed out of these traditions, although obviously with a different focus.

In the tradition of the church

To some extent sermons have always been a product of their times. For two thousand years, mostly men (but also a surprising number of women) have preached the good news of Jesus Christ around the world. The venues have varied – in churches, in homes, in huge tents at revival meetings, in public squares, on radio and television, and on the Internet.

Sermons have tried to accomplish different things at different times:

- Announce the Word of God.
- Claim that God is unhappy with the way things are and wants something to change.

- Teach the Bible and church doctrine.
- Defend Christianity against perceived threats.

Preachers have responded to wars, natural disasters, social issues and politics by offering theological commentary. Sermons have not only responded to what has happened in the world but have also helped to shape the future. Historically, churches – and the sermons preached in them – have had the power to influence public opinion, and as such have been perceived to have a great deal of authority.

Recent developments

It is no secret that the church is no longer as powerful as it once was, that its influence is decreasing. Sermons might not have the same impact on society as they once had, but the spoken word still has the potential to change the world. Imagine the civil rights movement without the preaching of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.! In spite of changing perceptions, preachers continue to find new ways to connect deeply with listeners.

In the twentieth century, preaching went through a major change – some call it a revolution. Scholars of preaching began to recognize that listeners have an active role. They participate in sermons as they recall their own experiences, form opinions and interpret the sermon within the context of their own lives. Scholars also recognized that there is no such thing as universal when it comes to preaching: different communities have different religious and spiritual experiences. Preachers also began to pay attention to the field of literature, realizing that sermons are narratives; that is, sermons tell stories.

Preachers today can also draw on rich preaching traditions that have developed among different groups around the world, for example

- African-American preaching grew out of experiences of slavery and the profound sense of God's presence in times of trouble;
- Liberation preaching announces God's good news to the world's poor;
- Feminist preaching claims God's good news for women as well as men.

This list does not even scratch the surface of the variety of preaching traditions that have developed throughout history and are still emerging today. It is enough to say that there are more ways to preach than you can imagine; preachers are not limited to one style or tradition. There is a cloud of witnesses – centuries of preachers – who have paved the way for people today who are beginning to learn how to speak God's Word out loud.

PREACHING AS A TASK of CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

The Christian church has been around for two millennia and preaching has always been a significant part of its ministry. Week by week the church gathers to hear, and engage with, the Word of God; the preached sermon is one way that the gathered community does this. The definition of preaching might seem self-evident, but it is important to begin with a shared understanding of the term. In this resource I define preaching as

*spoken communication
centred around God's revelation (i.e., in Christ, in scripture, in our experience)
occurring in Christian worship
in which a "conversation" occurs among God and God's people
about the gospel (the good news)*

This definition of preaching does not include preaching aimed at non-Christians, or street preaching or faith-based political speeches. Therefore, this resource focuses on preaching that occurs in public Christian worship, as part of the formation of Christian identity and community.

Preaching as a conversation

How can preaching be a conversation when only one person speaks? Imagine the sermon as one part of a conversation that happens between God and God's people. While you might be surprised if a member of a congregation actually answered while you were preaching, it is important to recognize that people can be deeply engaged in sermons in other ways. For example, a listener's inner voice might reflect on what the preacher is saying, measuring it with personal experiences; also, we believe that the Holy Spirit is speaking to us all the time. Therefore, one of the responsibilities of a preacher is to maintain an ongoing conversation with God, while at the same time striving to be connected with the people in the pew. The latter can be achieved by establishing and maintaining two-way communication with the congregation before and after preaching – and even during the sermon by watching people's body language.

In this sense, preaching can be part of the ongoing conversation of the church of Jesus Christ.

Preachers as ambassadors

Living Faith: A Statement of Belief (7.4.1), a subordinate standard of our church, describes the preacher's role in this way:

“To the church and to the world
Christ sends ambassadors to preach the good news.
The reconciling work of Jesus
was the supreme turning point in the life of the world.
The proclamation of his cross and resurrection
calls for personal response
and offers present hope.”

How is being a preacher like being an “ambassador”? In its simplest terms, an ambassador is a person who represents someone else. Preachers are representatives of God. This does not mean that preachers have divine authority, or that their words come directly from God. It does mean, however, that they have a responsibility to represent God as honestly and faithfully as possible.

But what does it mean to “represent” God? Preachers tell the good news of the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, accomplished by his death and resurrection:

- Jesus came to reconcile us to God and to each other and all creation.
- Jesus' death and resurrection changed the course of human history.
- Jesus' death and resurrection requires a response from his disciples.

Therefore, preaching not only shares the good news of what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ, but it also encourages God's people to respond in a variety of ways and to live with hope.

Role of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit plays a vital role in preaching: “The Holy Spirit enables God's Word to be heard in the word of preaching” (*Living Faith* 7.4.1).

We believe that the Spirit is present as the preacher prepares sermons and when the community

PREACHING IS ALCHEMY

“Something happens between the preacher's lips and congregations' ears that is beyond prediction or explanation. The same sermon sounds entirely different at 9:00 and 11:15 a.m. on a Sunday morning. Sermons that make me weep leave my listeners baffled, and sermons that seem cold to me find warm responses. Later in the week, someone quotes part of my sermon back to me, something she found extremely meaningful – only I never said it.

There is more going on here than anyone can say. Preaching is finally more than art or science. It is alchemy, in which tin becomes gold and yard rocks become diamonds under the influence of the Holy Spirit. It is a process of transformation for both preacher and congregation alike, as the ordinary details of their everyday lives are translated into the extraordinary elements of God's ongoing creation. When the drum roll begins and the preacher steps into place, we can count on that. Wherever God's word is, God is – loosening our tongues, tuning our ears, thawing our hearts – making us a people who may speak and hear the Word of Life.” – Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, (Boston, MA: Cowley Publications, 1993), 53.

gathers for worship. Once the words leave the preacher's mouth, the Spirit carries them to the listeners' ears. Presbyterians believe that the Word of God is received and interpreted by the community through the Holy Spirit. And preachers never know what will happen to their words once the Holy Spirit takes hold of them! The Word of God, carried into the gathered community by the Spirit, enables people to form and strengthen their faith; as people hear God's Word in community, and reflect upon it, their faith is sustained and nurtured: "Faith comes by hearing, and by preaching it is continually renewed" (*Living Faith* 7.4.1).

In relationship with God

Living Faith (7.4.2) reminds us of the relationship that preachers must have with God:

"Preachers must be servants of the Word;
those who listen should pray
for those who speak.
They must be hungry to hear what the Lord has to say.
The spoken word is food for all believers."

If preachers are going to represent God, they must be in relationship with God. To be in relationship with God requires listening before speaking, and praying before telling the good news. Preachers "must be hungry" for God in order to share in the feeding of others.

Why do we preach?

We preach because God has done something so amazing that we can't help but share the good news!
We preach because preaching can strengthen the church for participation in God's mission to the world!
We preach because God's people need help to interpret and live out God's Word!
We preach because the Word of God belongs to the whole community!
We preach because through preaching, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, lives are transformed!
Hallelujah!

PART B

PREPARING TO PREACH



EXPERIENCING THE GOOD NEWS

Living Faith (2.5.7 and 2.5.8) reminds us of the good news:

“God’s way to salvation
has been revealed in Jesus Christ.
Through the death and resurrection of Christ
our sins are forgiven.
Salvation means life, forgiveness, healing, wholeness.
It comes from God’s grace
received through faith in Christ alone.
Thanks be to God!”

We preach because we have the good news to share about what God has done in Jesus Christ. The good news of Jesus Christ is also called the gospel. We believe that the gospel, while revealed in Jesus, is not limited to his life and resurrection or to what is written in the biblical books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The gospel takes into account the whole of “salvation history” – that is, all God’s interactions with humankind from the time of creation: everything that God has done, is doing and will do in the world.

Preaching teaches and celebrates this good news – reminding us about it when we find life challenging or distracting – so that it might shape and form people as God’s people. Ideally every sermon draws every listener toward what God has done in the past, what God is doing today and what God will do in the future. In this way a preacher prepares people to go out into the world to participate in God’s work.

What is the good news?

While we often refer to the good news, how often do we reflect on what it means for ourselves, for others in our congregation and for our neighbours? In Luke 4:18–19, Jesus announced that the good news was the proclamation of “release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year

of the Lord's favour." Jesus was also specific that he was to take the good news "to the poor."

God sent Jesus into the world not because the world was doing just fine, but because the world was broken. An important aspect of preaching the gospel is to be aware of some of the ways that individuals and communities today are in need of the good news of God's grace and reconciling love that brings forgiveness, peace and hope. Preaching takes into account the world's brokenness and yearnings, and offers God's good news as a response.

Paradoxically, hearing the good news can be both wonderful and difficult. It can present a challenge because it requires change and doing something in a different way from what people are accustomed to. That can be very hard to hear! Even though people's lives may become more abundant and faithful and joyful, people are often reluctant to take risks, to make changes and to live differently. This is human nature. (For example, consider the story of the rich young man in Matthew 19:16–22. See Reflection Three in the Appendix.) But, God never gives up on us; God forgives us, repeatedly approaches us, and guides us. However, this does mean that the message in sermons may meet resistance; that some listeners will sometimes not want to change their attitudes or behaviour. Think of a preacher as a messenger: the preacher does his or her best to interpret scripture and to suggest how God's Word affects us today. The rest is up to God. Preachers cannot force their ideas upon others, nor can they be responsible for the power of God's Holy Spirit working in the lives of individuals and in communities.

Preaching the good news

To preach the good news as best we can, we need to develop an understanding of, and a relationship with, God. We believe that God wants to be known by us, but that we can't discover God all on our own or all at once, or expect to know everything about God. We can know only what God chooses to reveal.

In our faith journey, we may encounter God at unexpected times and in profound ways. Some people speak about having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ; this experience has helped them understand not only their own, but also God's identity.

The gospel's "peculiar speech"

Bishop Will Willimon describes the language of preaching as "peculiar speech" because he believes "the Bible engenders a kind of peculiar way of talking about the world." In a 1993 interview about his book *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*, Willimon said, "I think we contemporary Christian communicators have not given the Gospel credit for how odd it is and how little everyday words that everybody thinks they already understand – words like the poor, child, Caesar, the world – we don't really know what these words are until the Gospel tells us, because the Gospel has some very peculiar things to say about these words."

Willimon asserts that the gospel is actually very simple: "Like, go sell everything you've got, give it to the poor – then you'll have it"; that the gospel is "not an intellectual dilemma as much as it is a discipleship dilemma." When people hear Willimon preaching and then say, "That is the most outrageous, shocking, confusing thing I have ever heard; I just find that shocking," Willimon says he wants to say to them, "Well gosh, what did you expect? It's called church, it's called the Gospel. I didn't invite you... I didn't call you to follow Jesus – Jesus did... Did somebody tell you this was going to be easy?" – Michael Dudit, "Preaching to the Baptized: An Interview with William Willimon," *Preaching: Leading the Church, Proclaiming the Word*, September 1, 1993. <http://www.preaching.com/resources/articles/11563610/>

Spiritual disciplines

Some church ministers talk about spiritual practices or disciplines – the actions they take on a regular basis (ideally, this would be daily and weekly) to develop and maintain their relationship with God.

These might include

- reading the Bible and its story of how God created and redeemed all people
- reading the writings of generations of Christian theologians
- singing hymns that witness to the way God has touched the lives of various communities
- experiencing creation
- praying
- interacting with others – including acts of giving and receiving, as well as conversations
- worshipping
- being silent and listening

Experiencing God in our lives in different ways and on an ongoing basis prepares us for preaching the good news.

Beginning with the Bible

God is revealed to us in many ways, but the Bible is a unique source for preaching. The Bible tells us about how God has worked throughout history and how people of faith have interpreted God's action in the world. Our preaching begins with the Bible and strives to interpret scripture faithfully. *Living Faith* says that the Bible is the “rule of faith and life. It is the standard of all doctrine by which we must test any word that comes to us from church, world, or inner experience” (5.1). The Bible tells us about God the Creator, Jesus and the Holy Spirit – and the way the Triune God has worked to save humanity. What we know about God in Christ we know first because of scripture. Chapter Six describes a process for reading and analyzing scripture passage(s) selected for a sermon.

LISTENING TO God AND God's CREATION

Preaching is about much more than writing and delivering a sermon. As described in Chapter Three, ideally a preacher is always striving to

- cultivate a life that is oriented toward God and neighbour
- grow his or her faith
- maintain a lively relationship with God
- seek new ways to share the good news

Living Faith 7.4.2 reminds us that to preach well we must listen well. To become a preacher (at least, to become a good preacher) involves striving to develop a whole other level of listening before even planning the sermon or composing a sentence!

Listening to God

Prayer is a critical precursor of sermon preparation. Through prayer we place the focus on God, our relationship with God, and that everything we do is for and with God. What message is God calling you to proclaim in this sermon? Writer's block in sermon writing is more likely to occur when you forget to pray – to listen to God. Sometimes the best thing a preacher can do is sit quietly with God – perhaps also with a scripture or a sermon idea – and listen for the Holy Spirit's wisdom. Talking to God out loud helps, too! Sometimes reading a scripture passage, a prayer, hymn lyrics or listening to music with special spiritual significance can help a preacher focus on God.

Listening to yourself

Good preachers are self-aware. They have an understanding of who they are and their relationships with other people and parts of creation: their own beliefs, values, biases, attitudes, opinions, contradictory behaviours, weaknesses, strengths, doubts and fears, hopes and dreams. The sermons you write and deliver will be influenced by who you are as a child of God. Awareness, rather than denial, of your personal characteristics

DIVINE GRACE AND HUMAN SKILL

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote in her book *The Preaching Life* (Cowley Publications, 1993), "Watching the preacher climb into the pulpit is a lot like watching a tightrope walker climb onto the platform as the drum roll begins ... If they reach the other side without falling, it is *skill* but it is also *grace* ..." It is impossible for the preacher to walk the fine line over the sermonic chasm from one side to the other without both divine "grace" and human "skill." Preachers fall when they ignore either one. – Lenny Luchetti, "Preaching, a Spiritual Discipline?" *Leadership Journal*, July 14, 2014. Available at <http://www.ctlibrary.com/le/2014/july-online-only/preaching-spiritual-discipline.html>

will make you a better preacher. There is nothing wrong with struggling to interpret scripture if you have niggling doubts about whether it is true or relevant, or because you recognize that it challenges you. There is nothing wrong with being afraid to speak out about your faith or about your doubts. Preachers put themselves on the line every week, using their God-given gifts to prepare the best sermon they can while relying on their faith, trusting that God will support them in their weakest moments.

Listening to other preachers

Listening to and reading others' sermons can also be instructive. It is perfectly

acceptable, even beneficial, to copy the style of a preacher you admire. This is not to say you should preach someone else's sermon! But learn from the rhythms and patterns of good preachers. Encountering excellent sermons – or even speeches and narratives – can introduce you to beautiful language, cadences and rhythms, theological interpretations, and the benefits of poise and confidence in the pulpit. (See Reflection Two in the Appendix for suggestions about learning from other preachers' sermons.)

Listening to the worshipping community

In the tradition of Presbyterian churches, generally preaching a sermon consists of one person speaking to a gathered, quiet community. This is not the case in all denominations. In Sunday worship in an African-American church in Atlanta, Georgia, the preacher begins speaking to the congregation and within minutes the listeners begin speaking to the preacher. They shout out their agreement and disagreement; they respond to the message with their voices and their bodies. While this might shock a Canadian Presbyterian, it provides an important insight about preaching: a sermon belongs to the whole community, not just to the preacher. Those members of that Atlanta church know that. They believe that the preacher is accountable to them as well as to God. God's Word is for all of us; it *belongs* to all of us. And even though we choose one person to stand up and interpret God's Word to us, the preacher speaks on behalf of the community. The sermon becomes part of an ongoing conversation in which a particular community of faith names and responds to God's actions in the world.

At times in the church's history (and still today), some preachers have delivered sermons as though they hold all the knowledge of God; worshippers are expected to passively receive the preacher's wisdom. To view preaching this way is to underestimate the role of the congregation. Listeners need not be passive. The preached word can inspire a response; it can connect with listeners in a profound way; it can invite them

WARNING!

Listening to great preachers will improve your preaching. It might not improve your self-esteem. Remember that you don't have to be a pro. You don't have to sound like Martin Luther King Jr., Fred Craddock or Barbara Brown Taylor! Affirm your personal qualities and be inspired by theirs.

to participate in the discovery of God's word. While preachers do not expect listeners to shout out during a sermon (although that is a wonderful practice in some communities of faith), they can benefit from being part of the ongoing conversation of the community, learning about different people's needs and challenges. Chapter Seven offers suggestions on analyzing a congregation's context.

Listening locally and globally

For preachers to give relevant sermons, they must try to stay connected with what is going on in the lives of people and in communities worldwide. If you are informed about local and global current events, you will be better able to write a sermon that encourages people to encounter God, to make connections between what God is doing in the biblical text and what God is doing in our world. Make time in your busy life to

- Talk to people as they go about their routines: church people, grocery shoppers, coffee baristas and their customers, patients in a doctor's waiting room, co-workers in the lunchroom and children in the school playground.
- Read magazine and newspaper articles and books (or at least the reviews) that others are reading.
- Listen to radio programs, watch TV shows and movies, and visit websites that others recommend.
- Look everywhere for signs of God; for people struggling in relationships; for people living God's way; for indications of doubt, fear or hurt as well as joy and celebration.

The better you understand community and world issues, the better you will be able to write sermons that reflect the reality of your listeners and the truth of God's engagement with the world.

PART C

PREPARING A SERMON



CHOOSING SCRIPTURE

As discussed in Chapter Three, preaching is about proclaiming the good news. Therefore, the Bible is the primary foundation on which sermons are built. While sermons may address themes (e.g., discipleship) by drawing on a variety of Bible passages, preachers – particularly novices – are advised to build their sermons upon a single biblical text. But which text? How does a preacher choose the scripture for each sermon?

There are several calendar-based “tools” that can be used separately or together to help you choose a biblical passage. These include:

- the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) readings
- the liturgical calendar and themes
- non-liturgical calendar and themes of The Presbyterian Church in Canada
- national and international special days and themes

The Revised Common Lectionary

The Revised Common Lectionary is a guide that suggests scriptures for every week of the year. For most weeks, the lectionary offers one reading from each of the following:

- the Psalms
- Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures
- one of the gospels
- the Epistles or Letters (i.e., from the Book of Romans through Revelation)

If one uses the lectionary every week and reads the suggested passages, over the course of three years one will have read much of the Bible. The lectionary does not include every chapter and verse, but it does cover a great deal of scripture. “Following the lectionary” helps both preacher and worshippers get a sense of the whole Bible and how the story of God’s mission to the world has unfolded.

HOW TO USE A LECTIONARY

A lectionary may be used in several ways:

- a. To provide whole churches or denominations with a uniform and common pattern of biblical proclamation.
- b. As a guide for clergy, preachers, church members, musicians and Sunday school teachers, showing them which texts are to be read on a given Sunday.
- c. As a guide and resource for clergy from different local churches who wish to work and pray together as they share their resources and insights while preparing for their preaching.
- d. As a resource for those who produce ecumenical preaching aids, commentaries, Sunday school curricula and other devotional aids.
- e. As a guide to individuals and groups who wish to read and study the Bible in tune with the church's prayer and preaching.

Some local churches print the references to the following Sunday's readings in their bulletins and encourage people to come prepared for the next week's celebration; the psalm reference might also be included to encourage reflection on the first reading.

The lectionary also shows us the relationship of the readings of one Sunday with those that come before and after it. Within each of the major seasons of Lent, Easter, Advent, and Christmas-Epiphany, the flow of the season is reflected in all the Scripture texts, taken together as a set for each Sunday.

– Based on information about the Revised Common Lectionary available at <http://www.commontexts.org/rcl/>

Many ministers and congregations choose to use the Revised Common Lectionary. Some advantages include the following:

- It provides a sense of the movement of the whole Bible and the overarching story of God-with-us.
- It creates an important bond with other churches locally, nationally and around the world who also follow the lectionary.
- Where the church school is also using lectionary-based resources, it means that children and adults are learning about the same biblical passages/stories/themes.
- There are many worship and preaching resources that use the lectionary and can help with sermon writing.
- Lectionary readings follow the liturgical calendar. (See the information that follows.)
- Use of the lectionary encourages preachers to preach on a variety of scriptures and biblical themes – many they would never have chosen. And it has been found that there is a human tendency for preachers to use repeatedly their favourite passages and avoid some that might prove to be more challenging.

In a crisis situation – such as a death, community tragedy or disaster – the lectionary text may not be the most appropriate. However, generally the lectionary and all the lectionary-based resources can be very helpful to a new preacher. In addition, as

preachers work through the lectionary, they acquire a deeper understanding of the historical, cultural and literary relevance of the books of the Bible, and their knowledge of scripture grows exponentially.

Liturgical or church year calendar

The church has its own calendar. The liturgical church year begins with the first Sunday of Advent and ends with Reign of Christ Sunday at the end of November. In between, the calendar guides us through various stages of Jesus' life from his birth, baptism, temptation, teaching and healing ministry, arrest and trial, death and resurrection. It invites us to walk together through these seasons of faith, with each season reflecting on particular aspects of the Christian story.

CURRENT LECTIONARY READINGS

Go to the worship page (<http://presbyterian.ca/worship/>) of The Presbyterian Church in Canada's website to find

- revised Common Lectionary Readings for the current year, week by week
- lectionary hymn suggestions
- lectionary-based worship planners for upcoming Sundays

Note that the three-year cycle is referred to in terms of Year A, Year B and Year C. Each year focuses on readings from one of Matthew, Mark or Luke. Passages from the Gospel of John are included in each year.

LITURGICAL CALENDAR AND THEMES

Advent

This is the beginning of the church year. In the four Sundays leading up to Christmas Eve, we reflect on the world's brokenness and need for a saviour. We long for God and are on the alert, actively waiting and preparing for the coming of Christ. A common ritual in Presbyterian congregations is the lighting of a candle on each Sunday to represent hope, peace, joy and love.

Christmas

Beginning on Christmas Eve, our attention turns to Christ in our midst – the Word made flesh. The Christmas season lasts 12 days.

Epiphany

Epiphany takes place on January 6 when we traditionally remember the journey of the three wise men or magi to visit and present gifts to the infant Jesus. We give thanks for Christ as the light of the world.

Season after the Epiphany

After Epiphany, there is a period of time in which no special festivals are celebrated. However, this is a time to focus on call, discipleship and growing in faith. Included in this season are Sundays celebrating Jesus' baptism and transfiguration.

Lent

The season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday when we pause to remember human sinfulness and frailty. For 40 days, excluding the six Sundays, we accompany Jesus in his healing and teaching ministry. Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday when we remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem just before the Passover festival. The following Thursday (Maundy Thursday) we remember the Last Supper, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and his arrest. On Good Friday, we mourn his death.

Easter

The Lord is risen! He is risen, indeed! Easter is the day of celebration that God has overcome death. Jesus rose from the dead to live and reign forever and ever. The season of Easter continues for 50 days. It includes Good Shepherd Sunday and stories of the disciples' experiences of the risen Christ. The last Sunday of Easter is Ascension Sunday.

Pentecost

On the Day of Pentecost the disciples witnessed, and experienced in community, God's gift of the Holy Spirit. We give thanks and celebrate the birth of the church.

Season after Pentecost

The Season after Pentecost continues for 26 weeks. Themes include our relationship with God and faithful living. The season ends with Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday (at the end of November), the last Sunday of the Christian year.

Theme-based sermons

For various reasons, preachers can and do sometimes choose not to follow the lectionary or the liturgical calendar. For example, they may want to focus one or more sermons on a theme related to

- a non-liturgical church year date
- a particular event or date (of local, national or international significance)
- a particular theme (e.g., forgiveness, reconciliation, The Lord's Prayer) or book of the Bible

Regardless of whether the approach to sermon writing is calendar-based or theme-based, preachers need to connect their sermons to scripture, to choose a specific reading for the day's worship service, to demonstrate an understanding of it and to be able to interpret it for worshippers.

NON-LITURGICAL CALENDAR AND THEMES

Special worship resources, often including sermon notes, are prepared for many of the dates listed below. Check special days at <http://presbyterian.ca/worship/> or contact canadianministries@presbyterian.ca

January	Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (3rd week)
February	PWS&D Sunday (1st Sunday) Heritage Sunday (3rd Sunday)
March	World Day of Prayer (1st Friday)
April	Mission Awareness Sunday (last Sunday)
May	Christian Family/Mother's Day Sunday (2nd Sunday) Healing & Reconciliation Sunday (on or preceding May 26th)
June	General Assembly Sunday (1st Sunday) Father's Day (3rd Sunday) Aboriginal Sunday (on or preceding June 21st)
September	<i>Presbyterians Sharing</i> Sunday (last Sunday)
October	World Communion Sunday (1st Sunday) Harvest/Thanksgiving Sunday (2nd Sunday) Students and Theological Colleges Sunday (3rd Sunday) Reformation Sunday (on or preceding October 31st)
November	Restorative Justice Week (3rd week) Remembrance Sunday (on or preceding November 11th) Planned Giving Sunday (3rd Sunday)

SOME NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SPECIAL DAYS AND THEMES

The dates listed below are recognized by the United Nations (UN), US government and/or Canadian government. They are often referred to by congregations of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Note that these dates do not include local theme weeks (e.g., “Anti-bullying week”) or special months (e.g., February is African Heritage Month), which can be obtained by contacting your local municipality and/or school board.

January	19	Martin Luther King Jr. Day (US)
	27	International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust (UN)
February	20	World Day of Social Justice (UN)
March	8	International Women’s Day (UN)
	21	International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (UN)
	22	World Water Day (UN)
		Earth Hour (8:30 – 9:30 p.m. on a designated Saturday)
April	7	World Health Day (WHO)
	22	Earth Day (UN)
May	26	National Day of Healing and Reconciliation (Canada)
June	5	World Environment Day (UN)
	12	World Day against Child Labour Day (UN)
	17	World Day to Combat Desertification & Drought (UN)
	20	World Refugee Day (UN)
	21	National Aboriginal Day (Canada)
July	18	Nelson Mandela International Day (UN)
August	9	International Day of the World’s Indigenous People (UN)
	12	International Youth Day (UN)
	23	International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade & Its Abolition (UN)
September	21	International Day of Prayer for Peace (UN, World Council of Churches)
October	1	International Day for Older Persons (UN)
	16	World Food Day (UN)
	17	International Day of the Eradication of Poverty (UN)
November	11	Remembrance Day (Canada)
	20	Universal Children’s Day (UN)
	25	International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (UN)
December	1	World AIDS Day (UN)
	2	International Day of the Abolition of Slavery (UN)
	3	International Day of Persons with Disabilities (UN)
	6	National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence against Women (Canada)
	10	Human Rights Day (UN)
	18	International Migrants Day (UN)

ANALYZING SCRIPTURE

Once the scripture text has been chosen, the next step is to become *very* familiar with it. If only we could read a scripture passage and know immediately what God is saying! Unfortunately, this requires more from us than reading over the text a few times. With prayer and reflection, along with help from biblical scholars, we can read scripture with some understanding. There are countless resources available to help with Bible interpretation or “biblical exegesis.” “Exegesis” means “to interpret.” To perform a biblical exegesis involves listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit and reflecting prayerfully on what the text might have meant when it was written and how it is relevant today. The following is a six-step process to help sermon writers get to know the passage “inside out.”

A six-step process

STEP 1 – READ THE BIBLE SCRIPTURE

No matter how familiar you are with the chosen passage

- Read the passage a second time.
- Read it silently.
- Read it from two or three different translations, such as the *New International Version* (NIV), the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV), *The Message* and the *Good News*. Each translation or paraphrase will give a slightly different interpretation of the text (Note: Find out which version is available in the pew and will be read from in the service).
- Read it aloud. If possible, have someone read it to you. People experience scripture differently with different senses, including when those senses work separately and together.
- Read it at different times of the day and in different places.

Biblical exegesis

Theology students learn how to do biblical exegesis, an approach to interpreting Bible passages using critical analysis. Biblical exegesis involves the thorough examination of a particular scriptural text in order to interpret it: to understand what the original meaning might have been and what God might be saying today. Biblical exegesis, a part of the process of hermeneutics or the “science of interpretation”, includes exploring the following:

Grammar – since an English Bible is a translation, examine the specific choice of words and the syntax. Theology students often go back to the original text using Greek and Hebrew dictionaries.

Literal context – learn about the meaning of the words and phrases at the time they were written.

Cultural and historical context – learn about the geography, customs, events and politics at the time a passage was written. An understanding of ancient Jewish culture, the geography of the region and its history can greatly help in interpreting scripture. Refer to Bible dictionaries, atlases, commentaries and books on history.

Synthesis – compare and relate the specific passage with its immediate context in the Bible – the verses surrounding it – and with other relevant passages in the Bible, including those in other books about the same story or event.

Application – apply new-found knowledge and understanding to one’s own life.

Questions that might be asked:

- Who wrote the text? Who is the intended readership?
- What is the context of the text (i.e., how does it fit with the author’s larger thought process, intention or argument in the chapter and book where it resides)?
- When was the text written? What is the cultural, historical context?
- Why was the text written? What was the author’s intention (to correct, encourage, explain, etc.)?
- Why did the author say it this way? Is the choice of words or word order significant?
- How did the author’s contemporaries understand him? How might they have understood this passage?

Do not underestimate the likelihood of hearing scripture “afresh.” Many people – including preachers – have read a passage numerous times. Yet, when they listen to a reading of it during Bible study or a worship service, they hear something different, make a new connection or gain an insight they have not previously experienced.

STEP 2 – SPEND TIME WITH THE SCRIPTURE

In order to write a sermon based on the passage, it is helpful to “bring to life” the scripture:

- Are you an artist? Draw the images that arise from the text. Imagine what media – materials, colours – you might use to create a visual of the passage.
- Are you dramatic? Imagine a stage set for the text and consider all the characters and where they might enter, stand and exit. How might they interact?
- Are you a musician? Sing or play a hymn or song that is based on, or might be associated with, this text.

It is also helpful to “live with the scripture.” Read the passage in different venues and at different times of the day or week; for example while sitting on a park bench, in a coffee shop near a high school, on a bus during rush hour or in sight of a

English Translations of the Bible

The first translation of the Bible into English was by John Wycliffe in the 14th century. The King James Version (KJV) was commissioned by James I of England and published in 1611 and reflects the everyday speech of England in the 17th century. In Course B – Bible Background, Learning Module 2 of the online educational program *Opening Doors to Discipleship* (ODTD) at www.odtd.net (of which the PCC is a partner), we learn that “The discovery of new manuscripts, and historical and textual criticism prompted demands for new translations that would make use of this new knowledge of the Biblical texts.” The ODTD course goes on to provide the list below of the more common translations and paraphrases in use today. Note that along with making use of new knowledge, some translations are more responsive to contemporary language issues (e.g., inclusive language, readers’ level of comprehension):

Revised Standard Version (RSV) – 1952

New English Version (NEV) – 1970 (stays close to original Hebrew and Greek)

Good News Bible (GNB) or

Today’s English Version (TEV) – 1976 (emphasizes modern contemporary language)

New International Version (NIV) – 1978 (stays close to original Hebrew and Greek)

The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) – 1989 (stays close to original Hebrew and Greek)

New Oxford Annotated (NOA) – 2001 (adds footnotes and introductory material)

The Message – 2002 (paraphrase*)

*Note from ODTD: “A paraphrase results from an author reworking the words in a free and contemporary manner to make the meaning clear. It is often done from a translation already in existence.”

playground, nursing home, homeless shelter or hospital. How do different surroundings and contexts affect your understanding of the text? Read it out loud to a friend. What do they hear the text saying? (See *Preaching as Testimony* by Anna Carter Florence, Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.)

STEP 3 – ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SCRIPTURE

Alone, or with others, brainstorm as many questions as you can about the passage – for example, ask yourself: How do I feel about the text? What surprised me? What is it saying and why does this matter? What is God doing in the passage? Who is present? Who is missing or not represented? Also, identify unfamiliar vocabulary, geography and other references (e.g., What is a shekel? Where is Capernaum?)

Brainstorm answers to the subjective questions. Collect the questions that require research and let them guide your work in Step 4.

STEP 4 – LEARN FROM BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Although you might have a long list of questions about the scripture passage, you don’t have to answer them all by yourself. Someone else may have already asked the same question and written about it. Consult the experts.

A study Bible is your best friend. It will have general introductions to each book of the Bible, as well as brief explanations of many verses. It may be especially helpful when defining words or explaining unfamiliar terms. (See Recommended Study Bibles in the Appendix.)

A biblical commentary is a resource that goes through the books of the Bible chapter by chapter, verse by verse. Commentaries help provide important historical details about the text, and offer theological insights. Some even offer ideas on how

a Bible verse could be approached in a sermon. Your church office or library might have a set of commentaries. (See Recommended Commentaries in the Appendix.) Many are available in electronic versions. Some small three-volume commentary sets based on the lectionary have been published. These are quite affordable, if you are considering purchasing a commentary for your own office.

By far, the most accessible commentaries are found online. But approach online resources with caution. Remember that anyone can publish anything online, without gaining approval from experts. Most printed resources have at least been approved by an editor – not so with online writings. As a new preacher, it might be challenging for you to determine which websites are reputable. (See Recommended Websites in the Appendix.) Don't hesitate to ask other preachers for recommendations.

STEP 5 – LEARN ABOUT THE DIFFERENT CONTEXTS OF THE PASSAGE

Whether you are referring to a study Bible, reading a commentary or participating in a study group, it is important to gather information about the literary, cultural and historical circumstances surrounding each passage.

Consider the literary context of the scripture you have chosen. What style of writing is it? A psalm or song of praise? A legal code? A parable or story? Or maybe a letter? Each piece was prepared with a different purpose in mind, which may be relevant to what and how you preach. For example, Paul's letters (epistles) were written to a particular congregation in a particular place, and refer to specific issues that affected that congregation. A psalm, on the other hand, is a piece of liturgical writing – a song designed for use in worship. We interpret a worship song differently than we would a letter written to a group of people.

The text that surrounds the selected scripture passage is also important. The Bible has been woven together in magnificent ways. Usually its writers intentionally placed the material in a particular order. To interpret a passage, examine the verses that come before and after it; get a sense of where your passage “fits” in the flow of the chapter and with respect to the whole book.

The Bible was written a long time ago. What do we know was going on when your chosen passage was recorded? What was the context for the people, events or places mentioned? Learn as much as possible about the historical and political events, geographical factors, world developments, social changes and values. While our world is vastly different, there may be similarities between then and now, especially with regard to human nature. There may also be major differences in knowledge, philosophies and priorities; for example, we know now that the world is round, and that North American society today values individualism.

THE PASSAGE AND A PREDETERMINED THEME

Perhaps you had determined a sermon theme prior to beginning the scriptural analysis and chose a passage you'd thought was fitting. As you explore the scripture, be mindful of how what you are learning connects with the theme. If, in the process of analysis, the connection seems tenuous or unsuitable, stop and reflect on how the passage works and doesn't work with your message. Pray for guidance about your theme and scripture choice. Be ready to change or confirm one or the other. If you decide to make a change, be sure to file away your notes as they will likely be useful at a later date – for writing a different sermon!

Living Faith (5.4) reminds us of this process:

“The Bible is to be understood in the light of the revelation of God’s work in Christ. The writing of the Bible was conditioned by the language, thought, and setting of its time. The Bible must be read in its historical context. We interpret Scripture as we compare passages, seeing the two Testaments in light of each other, and listening to commentators past and present. Relying on the Holy Spirit, we seek the application of God’s word for our time.”

STEP 6 – SEEK WISDOM FROM OTHERS

Other people may have their own interpretation and experience with the scripture you’ve chosen. Are there family members, members of your congregation or other friends you might like to discuss those passages with? Some preachers form “lectionary groups” with others who are reading the weekly lectionary passages. These groups might be composed of a cross-section of people from a particular congregation or involve ministers from other denominations in the area. Such groups provide a time and place to discuss the week’s scripture readings, share knowledge, float ideas for sermons, wrestle with difficult meanings and listen to a variety of perspectives. If you don’t have an opportunity to participate in a discussion group, try to find others with whom you can explore the passage; alternatively read a lectionary-based daily devotions book (e.g., *The Upper Room Disciplines* published annually by Upper Room Books). The voices of others help us hear and see God at work in the world in all God’s many different ways.

ANALYZING THE CONGREGATION

You have chosen the scripture and you have become *very* familiar with it. You have lived with it, read what others have written about it, and learned about its literary and historical contexts. Emerging from this may be points of connection with God speaking and acting in the world today. But what might be the points of connection for your listeners? What message is God longing to have you speak to them? What is the good news they need to hear?

An analysis of the congregational context is also helpful for sermon writing. In recent decades preachers have recognized the importance of understanding the specific realities of a particular congregation in a particular place and time. Preaching is most relevant for the listeners when it grows out of an understanding of their day-to-day living. Certainly it is easier for a preacher to know this context if already familiar with the congregation. However, it is always worthwhile to reflect intentionally on the people in their location and to become as “tuned in” to their lives as possible.

With a little effort, preachers can develop an understanding of the unique characteristics of the worshipping community. Obviously, each individual in the congregation has slightly different beliefs and perceptions. Yet, one can generally gain a sense of a collective identity: who are these

CONGREGATIONAL EXEGESIS

In the book *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, author and preaching scholar Leonora Tubbs Tisdale devotes Chapter Three to congregational “exegesis”; that is, how to discern and interpret the “texts” of congregational life and activity. Some things you can observe with your senses by browsing bulletin boards, walking around the building, standing in different parts of the sanctuary, seeing the spaces used by the different church and community groups, going into the church office and minister’s study. You can ask to see past annual reports and other archival materials or a copy of demographic information. In this age of Internet technology, the congregation’s website may provide you with information and photos about its history, staff, committees, programs and upcoming events. You can gain specific information by talking and listening to members of the congregation. Sometimes formal interviews are even possible.

FRUITFUL TEXTS

“There is a gold mine to be discovered through a careful attending to the stories people tell in congregational life. Indeed, there are probably no more fruitful ‘texts’ for analyzing congregational subculture than the narratives participants in congregational life share with the pastor in the ordinary process of carrying on ministry.”

– Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1977), 65–66.

people? What do they believe about God and about the world?

It is difficult to gain these insights if you preach in a particular location only once. In that case, you will have to rely on what you already know about the congregation or on what others can tell you. But if you preach often to the same congregation, you can “get to know” the people in a deeper way that will result in more context-appropriate preaching. In order to gain a good sense of the people in a given congregation, the preacher can become an intentional observer. By paying attention to various elements of congregational life, and

asking specific questions, you can develop a better understanding of congregational identity, resulting in sermons that might be more responsive to the needs and beliefs of the people in that place.

Guiding questions

In her book *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (1997), Leonora Tubbs Tisdale presents a useful way to analyze the context of – or “exegete” – a congregation.

The following questions are based on Tisdale’s approach. Let them serve as your guide:

- What is important to the people of this congregation?
- What past events do they continue to celebrate?
- What artwork/plaques hang on the walls?
- What would they say are their most important annual events?
- What do they disagree about?
- What stories do they tell most often?
- Who are they (i.e., describe characteristics like age, ethnicity, etc.)?
- How do they deal with diversity? How are they inclusive?

At a deeper level, you can learn about the congregation’s worldview and values by asking individuals these questions:

- How do you imagine God?
- What do you think about people (i.e., Are they basically good or sinful?).
- What do you believe about the importance of
 - community?
 - nature?
 - church?
 - mission – local and global?

All these questions may not be answered. However, gaining even a little insight into the congregation’s identity increases your chances of creating a sermon that acknowledges who the worshippers are and enables them to encounter God.

ARTICULATING THE FOCUS

Having read, and re-read, the scripture; lived with it; considered related themes; and thoroughly examined and analyzed scriptural – as well as congregational – context, you now have a lot of information. You have

- ✓ your own ideas, informed by your faith and personal life experiences
- ✓ ideas from others, (e.g., friends, relatives, historians and biblical scholars)
- ✓ background and contextual information about the scripture writer
- ✓ background and contextual information about the specific passage's content and characters

If you have gathered information about the congregation and its context, you have some ideas about

- ✓ who the listening worshippers will be, and the stages of life they are in
- ✓ the nature of being part of this congregational life – past and present
- ✓ characteristics and concerns of the community surrounding the church

Emerging from this may be

- ✓ points of connection with God speaking and acting in the world today

What will be the main message from God that you will bring when this scripture passage is presented on this occasion, to these worshippers at this place and time?

Discerning

As part of the process of discerning the specific sermon focus, review Chapter Four about listening preparation for sermon writing. Reflect on what you have heard through your prayer life, your efforts of greater self-awareness, and your efforts to

be in touch with the lives of worshippers and with the society and communities (both local and global) that affect them. Ask yourself:

- How do you think God might be speaking through this scripture to these people?
- What does this text conjure up for you? Does this scripture connect in a vital way to anything that is happening in the world or in this community at this time?
- What does this scripture say about God (i.e., God's nature), what God is doing in the world and what God may be doing in the lives of these worshippers?

God's message for this sermon

Your sermon focus is not about what you want worshippers to hear, but about what God wants them to hear. Focus each sermon on an aspect of God and God's message of good news. By their nature, sermons must be theological, and the preacher's role and responsibility is as a theologian.

This might send shivers of fear down your spine as you think, "Am I supposed to stand up in front of all these people and make a theological statement about God? I'm not a theologian!" However, in fact, we are all theologians. An important aspect of our Christian journey is learning to identify what God has done in the world and in our lives. When we "look" for God, when we interpret the world according to our faith, we are "doing" theology. Preaching takes this to the next level and invites us to share what we have seen God doing in the biblical text and in the world around us. Sometimes this means telling our own story. Sometimes it means telling other people's stories. Sometimes, it even means admitting that we can't figure out what on earth God is doing! In terms of your sermon, try to be very clear about what you believe about God and God's good news.

Narrowing the focus

One of the reasons people gather for worship is to discover something about God that will support them in their daily lives. The sermon can offer a helpful window into how God works in the world, providing strength and wisdom for the week to come.

Sometimes preachers are so excited about their research on a particular scripture or theme that they want to share it all. However, that would be overwhelming to listeners. Ideally, sermons try to convey one message, and to say it well. Aim to communicate one important, relevant, life-changing idea about God. There will be other Sundays and other sermons for other messages.

Even before creating a sermon plan and while you are gathering information, write down its focus in one or two sentences. Be specific, but not too narrow, in order to relate scripture and a theme in living faithfully today. Getting into this habit will assist you in creating clear, purposeful sermons.

For example, imagine that you are writing a sermon about Jesus and the feeding of 5000 people (Matthew 14:13–21). Thousands of sermons have been written about this story, but each one is different. In a sentence or two, write the focus for yours. The sentence, "*This sermon is about Jesus making sure there is enough food for everyone*"

A THESIS STATEMENT

In education and among professional writers, the main idea of an essay or oral presentation like a sermon is called a “thesis statement.” Also called the core concept, the big idea, the central proposition or the focus statement, a thesis statement functions to

- help the writer narrow the subject to a single, central idea for the audience
- name the topic and says something specific and important about it
- indicate the writer’s purpose, the reason for preaching about it
- (sometimes) help the writer, and tell the audience, how ideas will be arranged

Thesis statements take effort to develop. You may have one in mind as you gather information and “live with” the selected scripture and theme. Early on, write down your focus statement and return to it often, and revise it often. Ask yourself questions like these:

- Does the statement make a concise assertion about my subject?
- Does it focus on a single idea?
- Is the assertion specific and significant?
- Does it indicate or imply my purpose?
- Do the parts of the statement relate to each other?

is too broad, does not refer to the scripture and story, and offers little guidance in proceeding with a focused sermon. The following sentences are more helpful:

1. *When Jesus takes some bread and fish and feeds 5000 people, he demonstrates that he can satisfy the needs of his people.*
2. *Just as Jesus insisted that the disciples find some food to feed a hungry crowd, Jesus invites us to feed the hungry in our communities.*

The first sentence above directs the preacher to bring a message from God about “needs” and can be written to connect with specific needs that touch the worshipping community at this time. The second sentence provides a focus on “hunger”, which can be talked about literally and metaphorically, connecting with the worshipping community’s spiritual hunger and/or involvement in programs that serve people who are hungry.

DEVELOPING THE OUTLINE

You have articulated the focus of the sermon. The next step is to outline how you will organize all the information you have gathered in a way that will engage your listeners and proclaim this specific message of God’s good news. An outline or plan, developed out of a focus statement, will guide you in writing a clear sermon. The outline provides the “shape” for the sermon as you decide how you will make relevant connections – with scripture, the theme and your listeners. Like a screenwriter of a movie or author of a novel, the preacher creates a narrative that weaves together characters and ideas that, at their conclusion, leave a message with the listening audience.

Inductive and deductive sermons

In terms of how a sermon moves from beginning to end, there are two general approaches: *deductive* and *inductive*. In a deductive sermon, the preacher begins by making a claim or a main point and then proceeds to prove or develop it. The preacher might do this by giving reasons or evidence to support the focus of the sermon, or by developing its implications for the life of the church. With a deductive sermon, the listener learns at the beginning what it will be about; with the rest of the sermon the preacher helps the listener understand how the ideas were brought together to reach this point.

In an inductive approach, the preacher does not make the main point until closer to the end of the sermon. The preacher might begin with a series of questions, or real-life scenarios that describe a problem or concern about the Bible or the world. The preacher then turns to the Bible, to his or her own experience and to the theology of the church to clarify or answer the concerns that have been posed. With inductive sermons, listeners may feel like they are on a journey of discovery, as preacher and listener seem to explore the issue together, finally arriving at a concluding message.

Patterns

Deductive and inductive approaches are two general “patterns” for sermon writing, but they are by no means the only ones. In his book *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1998), Ronald J. Allen suggests thirty-two different patterns. Below, are three patterns with reasonably straightforward structures that are useful for new preachers to have in their preaching tool box.

PATTERN ONE: FOUR SECTIONS

Paul Scott Wilson in his book *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), suggests that preachers think of a sermon as divided into four sections or “pages” (although each section might be longer than a page). Each section has its own focus.

Section 1:

The focus is on the scripture. What is the “problem” or “trouble” in this passage? What does it say about the world’s brokenness or the difficulty of human life?

Section 2:

The focus is on our world today. How is the “trouble” identified in the scripture reading still “trouble” for us today? The preacher talks about the world today using stories and images to describe the trouble in the world.

Section 3:

The focus returns to the scripture. Where is the good news of God’s grace in the text? What is God doing to help the people who are in trouble? Not only in the specific biblical passage, but based on everything we know about God’s history of salvation, how does God save God’s people?

Section 4:

The focus returns to today. What is the good news of God’s grace for today? What is God doing today that is similar to what God has done in the biblical text, and in history?

Wilson imagines the preacher as a filmmaker, who points the camera at the biblical text and then at our own world to film “trouble.” The filmmaker then points the camera toward instances of God’s grace in the scripture, and instances of God’s grace in our world. This pattern makes sure that the good news is preached and grace gets the last word.

PATTERN TWO: PLAIN STYLE

Beginning:

This sermon pattern begins with an introduction that might be drawn from the scripture or from everyday life.

Middle:

- a) **Analysis of scripture:** Following the introduction, the preacher analyzes the scripture, explaining it in detail to the congregation and sharing relevant information about the context of the scripture and historical details. The preacher may also offer a theological interpretation of the passage, about what God is doing in this scripture.
- b) **Application to today:** The preacher moves on to suggest an application for the church today, answering the question, “What is the meaning of this scripture for us today?”

Ending:

The preacher summarizes the main points, ending with encouragement that worshippers carry this message from scripture into their day-to-day lives.

PATTERN THREE: THREE POINTS AND A POEM

Focus:

The preacher names the focus of the sermon at the outset.

Points:

The preacher names, and then in turn develops, three or four main points to support this focus. These points may be arguments that help validate it, or describe the implications of its statement for the lives of listeners.

Conclusion:

The sermon concludes with a relevant statement that draws it all together. Often, the preacher will quote a poem or the words of a hymn to illustrate the main focus – hence the title of this sermon pattern.

Planning what you want to say

Over time preachers develop their own approach and style to writing a sermon outline. I like to take a blank sheet of paper and “play” with my ideas until I come up with some interesting connections, illustrations and real-life stories to help me decide “what I want to say.” I shape and reshape my material into a plan. How will I begin?

How and where will I deal with the biblical material? How will I end? Where do I add stories and real-life connections?

This is usually the most challenging stage for me, but it is also the most critical. In creating the outline, I make decisions about what material to put where, and my sermon begins to take shape so that eventually I only have to write in the details. As you begin to develop sermons, I encourage you to create a plan before you start writing. This step helps a preacher prepare a sermon with a logical flow from beginning to end, including relevant information and stories at the appropriate points.

CREATING VISUAL OUTLINES

A popular organizing tool today is the mind map. Its many other names include spider or tree diagram or concept map. A graphic non-linear approach, it is frequently recommended as a method for organizing ideas and creating outlines. It can be developed simply by taking a blank piece of paper and writing a key word, theme or scripture in the centre. From this, draw lines outward and add secondary ideas, with some perhaps connecting to more than one other addition. Free online mind mapping software is available, which perhaps partly explains its popularity today.

WRITING THE SERMON

With a good outline prepared, I can often write the detailed sermon from beginning to end in one sitting. Other preachers write theirs in bits and pieces over days; some rearrange the sections throughout the writing process. Many preachers write their conclusion first, others the middle part, creating the introduction afterwards. With experience, you will discover a method that works best for you.

Much has been written about sermon introductions, conclusions and illustrations – too much to say here. However, a relevant introduction engages listeners immediately. A beginning joke or anecdote gets worshippers’ attention and, if carefully chosen, can direct them to your focus. Draw in the listener with an introduction that prepares them for what is to come. In the conclusion, help listeners capture the main points of your sermon. People tend to remember best the last thing they hear, so the conclusion is critical. It is not the time to add new information, but rather a time to summarize the main points in a creative and powerful way. If the conclusion mirrors or relates to the introduction, then it helps you stay focussed and deliver a unified message.

Sermon illustrations are usually stories taken from everyday life to clarify the scripture reading or sermon focus. Identifying suitable illustrations is a skill. Some preachers scour the Internet looking for “cute” stories that relate to a scripture text. However, the most fitting illustrations usually come from real life – while you are “living with” the selected scripture (as described in Chapter Six) in pastoral visits, talking to friends, reading the newspaper, reading books. When you have a scripture passage in mind, don’t be surprised by how often it “comes to life” as you make connections between it and real-life situations.

Tell stories that contribute to the main point of your sermons to avoid distracting or detracting from the focus. After all, the goal is to have listeners engage with God in a meaningful way because of your sermon – not go away with a great story or a new joke to tell their friends.

Putting yourself “out there”

Do you remember writing essays in high school, trying to avoid using the word “I”? Today most preachers agree that it is important to be themselves, to share some of their personal feelings, opinions and stories with worshippers. Many listeners agree they like preachers to be genuine. To be so, preachers must find appropriate ways to speak about their own faith and experiences of God. “Appropriate” is an important word. No worshipper wants to hear a preacher’s deep, dark secrets; nor do your listeners want to be drawn into the role of therapist. When preaching, you are engaged in a professional task. Never tell a story that will embarrass you or someone else.

The word “testimony” is helpful when thinking about how much of one’s life to share when preaching. Testimony might be most familiar as a legal term: in court, witnesses testify about what they have seen. In the same way, preachers can give a testimony or can “witness” by imparting how they know God and what they have seen God do in their lives and in the world. (See Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.)

Length

There is no correct length for a sermon. I suggest brevity – say what you mean to say, say it well and say it in as few words as possible. However, this is where your research into the preferences and traditions of the congregation will pay off (as described in Chapter Seven). What suits that particular congregation? Does fidgeting start after

How long and how many words?

For reference, one hundred typed words is roughly the equivalent of one minute spoken.

10 minutes? Are there complaints if the sermon doesn’t pass 40 minutes? I once knew a man who would put a mint in his mouth at the beginning of the sermon; if the sermon lasted longer than the mint, it was too long! This is not to say that you must be ruled by the expectations of the congregation with regard to the length of the sermon. In my experience, if it is a clear and passionate sermon, most people won’t even notice how long it is. However, it is beneficial to know what the congregation considers “normal.”

Coherence

As with any piece of writing or oral presentation, it is important a sermon unfolds so that others can follow the train of thought. It can be challenging for many people to sit and listen for a long stretch of time. Preachers can make it easier by presenting their ideas and illustrations with clarity, in an interesting but straightforward and logical style – without rambling, without digressing, without using a lot of complex words and phrases. Your research and analytical ability, your faith journey, your way with words and telling stories all contribute to crafting your sermon, but they must not obscure God’s message. You do not want people thinking afterwards, “That sounded like a good sermon; what do you think it was about?”

Action words and imagery

The English language is complex and challenging, providing endless possibilities for creating vivid and colourful narrative that can bring ideas to life in the minds of listeners. Like the very best poetry and prose, sermons can be evocative. They can

inspire images and connections, create pictures, and introduce new possibilities to worshippers. While your vocabulary must be accessible, choose from a variety of words and images. For example, when describing the day Jesus calmed the storm, try saying more than “there was a storm on the lake and the disciples were afraid.” Ask yourself: What does it feel like to be in danger? What happens to your nerves, to your senses? What does a stormy lake and sky look like? How do you feel when you are powerless? Asking these questions will help you identify action words and imagery for your sermon.

Revision

The final important stage of preparing a sermon is the *revision*. Once you have put all the pieces of your sermon together, it is time to read through what you have written and revise or edit it. Begin by reading your draft out loud to yourself. I usually sit at my computer and read it aloud, preferably when no one else is home. You may prefer to print a copy of your manuscript and read from it with a pencil or pen in hand for making changes. At this point, you are not practicing your delivery; you are listening to hear whether your sermon makes sense and flows easily when spoken: Do you stumble over words? Belabour a point? Include too much detail? Move on too quickly? Omit engaging images? Use too much of the same sentence structure? Use complex words and phrases when simpler ones would suffice?

Make corrections as you go along and remove anything that does not contribute to the main point of your sermon. Consult a thesaurus to find more interesting and descriptive words. Rewrite and rearrange sentences that are awkward or difficult to understand either because of the phrasing or the length.

Many people find this step the most difficult. Editing is a challenging process, but a necessary one. Few people, even the most renowned authors, write well without a lot of revising. When writing we can grow attached to our own words and phrases, and become reluctant to let them go. Yet, editing will improve every sermon. If initially you find this stage too difficult, ask someone else to edit it for you. With time and practice, you will become skilled at revising and improving your own work.

STRONG WRITING

While you can ignore spelling and punctuation rules since no one needs to see your manuscript, good grammar and writing mechanics bring strength to a sermon. There are resources available to help you learn to:

- write emphatically
- use parallelism (e.g., parallel construction of phrases)
- vary sentence length and structure
- use appropriate and exact words
- write concisely

Along with a dictionary and thesaurus, a writer’s handbook is a useful aid – for example Aaron & McArthur’s *The Little, Brown Compact Handbook* (Pearson School Canada, Toronto). Of course there are also online tools. The Purdue University OWL Writing Center is a website used by many post-secondary students in Canada. It’s available at <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>.

Learning how to write well is worth the time and effort. Weak writing can obscure significant information and ideas. Strong writing combined with excellent sermon delivery adds up to powerful preaching.

DELIVERING SERMONS

With a polished manuscript before you, it is time to focus on the art of delivering a sermon. Preaching is a full-body sport: your voice, presence, gestures and eye contact are all important. If you have prepared a fabulous message, you will want to ensure that the presentation is equally excellent. Think of the most effective public speakers you have heard. What was it about their delivery that captured your attention and made them memorable?

Sermon notes

The use of notes is a hotly debated topic among preachers and worshippers. Some people believe that all preachers should strive to preach without notes; this may mean that they memorize the manuscript, preach with the main points or a few key sentences before them, or preach with no notes at all. Preaching without notes does not necessarily result in a better delivery. In fact, sometimes it can be a disaster! On the other hand, done by a well-prepared preacher, this style can be extremely powerful and result in a deep connection with listeners.

Preparation and practice are essential, whether preaching with or without notes. It is rarely appropriate to stand before a congregation hoping that the Holy Spirit will provide the sermon. Indeed, I have nightmares about being called to speak at the last minute. Preaching without notes takes the same amount of preparation (if not more) as preaching from a full manuscript. If not using notes, be sure you are still putting sufficient effort into preparing your sermon.

If you are accustomed to preaching with notes, it will take effort and practice to learn to speak without them. You might want to tell your congregation that you are learning the skill, and ask for their patience as you adjust to it. If you do use notes, there are ways of laying out the words on the page to make your presentation smoother and easier for your eye to follow.

I like to write my sermons
as though I am writing poetry,
so that I have only one or two phrases on a line
instead of writing as I would
for an essay.

This helps prevent my sermon
from sounding like an essay.

It is also recommended that the lines be double-spaced, the characters be in at least a 14-point font and the pages be numbered. If it is helpful to you, add reminders to your manuscript. For example, if you have trouble remembering to take a break for a breath, write “pause.” Or write in a reminder to make a gesture that will help to punctuate a particular point.

Some preachers like to print their notes on a half sheet of paper, so that the notes can be tucked inside the worship bulletin. Smaller sheets of paper are also less of a distraction to listeners when the page is turned. Alternatively, a page can be slid to the side when the preacher moves on to the next page.

Eye contact

Eye contact is an important element of effective preaching. Most of us have experienced sermons where the preachers didn’t look up from their notes, or they stared at a fixed point on the wall just above people’s heads. Social psychologists suggest that listeners are less likely to believe and trust a person who avoids looking into your eyes.

Voice

When preaching, speak loudly and clearly. What is the number one comment I hear at the door when the folks are leaving the sanctuary after a worship service? “I could hear every word”, not “you are the best preacher in the world” or “your sermon just changed my life.” Especially in congregations with an older demographic, it is critical that your voice projects throughout the sanctuary. Before the service, test the audio system. Wear a microphone whenever one is available. Enunciate more carefully than in ordinary conversation. Aim your voice at the back row.

The pacing of delivery is also very important. Speak at a slower pace than in normal conversations. Include pauses. Many preachers fear that if they pause in the middle of a sermon, people will think they have lost their place! A pause provides listeners with a moment to catch up, digest what has been said and ready themselves for more!

Energy and enthusiasm

As you preach, allow your demeanour and attitude to complement the content. Smile and allow yourself to show your enthusiasm when talking about the good news. Be serious when you are saying hard things. Be aware that your tone and facial expressions reveal how engaged you are with your material and with the people in front of you. Most importantly, let your energy level reflect that you mean what you say and that you, too, feel the impact of your message.

Technology

Preaching in the 21st century often involves the use of technology: projectors and screens, tablets, computers, audio and video clips from the Internet. These tools can enhance a sermon if they are used appropriately and seamlessly. (Also ensure that the information transmitted is made available according to copyright laws. For information, go to <http://presbyterian.ca/copyright/>.) For some preachers and for many congregations, these tools are still novel. If you are going to use video or audio clips or project images or words on a screen, practice in advance. Arrive in sufficient time to test the equipment prior to the worship service and ask that someone knowledgeable meet you there to troubleshoot.

Take time to choose words and images for projection that will enhance and illustrate your message. Just as there is a tendency to want to include in your text everything you have learned about a scripture passage, there can be the tendency to want to include all the good images you have found. However, our brains have only so much capacity for stimulation. Visual presentations can enhance the spoken word, but they can also unintentionally detract and distract. For information about creating effective visual presentations, go to online tools like the Purdue University OWL Writing Lab's "Visual Rhetoric" at <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/7/>.

Some preachers today load their sermons onto a tablet or laptop, instead of printing them out. In addition to saving paper, this method reduces the amount of paper-shuffling while preaching from notes. If you are leading the worship service, you could also keep your notes for the children's story and written prayers on the device. When I began using my tablet for sermons, it took me several weeks to become comfortable with it, perhaps because I had been using paper for so long. I had to remember to have my device fully charged and to mute the volume so that the congregation did not hear the notification of incoming messages. Some preachers also turn down the brightness so that their faces do not take on an unnatural glow from the reflection of the device.

EVALUATING SERMONS

In order to improve the preparation and delivery of a good sermon, preachers can benefit from reflecting on their own performance. Even very experienced preachers will say there are good days and bad days. Not every sermon is profound and inspiring. It is worth remembering that preaching is a regular activity in a church, occurring week after week. I like to remind myself that sermons have a cumulative effect: the church and its congregations are shaped and formed not by one, but by many. Faith communities can and do survive a poor sermon. And for the preacher, a poor sermon offers an opportunity to learn and improve.

Learning from mistakes

Did you just preach the worst sermon of your life? Were your cheeks flaming with embarrassment because you were so unhappy with your words or your interpretation of scripture? If so, you are not alone! We all have those days. Maybe you had a rough week, maybe you weren't able to identify the voice of the Holy Spirit; maybe you were nervous. Whatever the reason, there's no need to panic. Resist the temptation to crumple your notes into the nearest recycling bin. You now have an opportunity to learn something about yourself and about your preaching, an opportunity to learn from the mistakes. Remind yourself that the Holy Spirit probably spoke through the sermon to worshippers in spite of you!

FAILURES OR SUCCESSES?

"Ministry as a whole is a ragged business, frequently attended by frustration and uncertainty. Like preaching itself it sometimes succeeds spectacularly and at other times fails dismally. Paul might even argue that the 'failures' are more important than the 'successes' because they provide an opportunity for God to triumph where Jesus' servants do not."
– Michael P. Knowles, *We Preach Not Ourselves: Paul on Proclamation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 162–3.

Evaluation forms

Ask yourself the following questions: Which part of the sermon worked well? What was the weak part? What changes would improve it? Use Evaluation Form A at the end of this chapter to guide you in a self-evaluation process.

Equally valuable is to get feedback from worshippers. If you are really brave, sit down with a couple of people who heard the sermon and ask them some of the questions from Form A, listening carefully, without defensiveness, to their comments.

Alternatively, before you go into the worship service, give out three to five copies of Form B, an evaluation form for worshippers to complete. This is a common practice when student ministers preach. Perhaps ask a church elder to help collect these for you afterwards.

Review the feedback from yourself and from listeners. Some of the comments will be useful to improve your next sermon writing and preaching experience. Compile these and have them by your computer or writing table for the next time. If time permits, create a second version of this sermon right away, revising it based on the suggestions. At the very least, file feedback notes and evaluation forms with a copy of your sermon and research notes as you might have another opportunity to preach about the same topic. Over time, you will build up a treasure trove of knowledge about the Bible, the historical and cultural contexts of its books, passages and related themes. Easy access will save you time and energy.

Opportunities to improve

Develop the habit of reflecting on each preaching experience, even those with which you feel satisfied. Over time you will learn to identify your strengths and those areas open for growth. Once you have determined your weaknesses and the growing edges of your preaching, set some goals about what you would like to improve; make a plan for meeting those goals. For example, you might choose to take a preaching course, get some private voice coaching, commit to reading a daily newspaper and/or weekly news magazine to become better informed about world events, or read some books about preaching or theology.

If you're a novice, you may find it beneficial to partner with a more experienced preacher for support, advice and feedback. On the subject of supporting lay leaders, authors Christine O'Reilly and Peter Bush write, "It has been and continues to be our experience that coaching plays a vital role in nurturing, refining, and encouraging the gifts of lay preachers. All God's people, ordained and lay, require accountability to remain true to scripture and the confessions of the faith" (*Where 20 or 30 Are Gathered: Leading Worship in the Small Church*, Alban Institute/Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006, 88).

Whatever methods you implement to improve your sermons, always continue learning. Many preachers reinvent their style, time and time again. As you change personally, as the world changes and as your faith community changes, you will be called upon to respond with meaningful words that are relevant and timely. Allow your preaching skills to develop and grow continually throughout your preaching life.

EVALUATION FORM A – FOR PREACHERS

These questions are designed to help preachers reflect on their sermons and preaching.

1. How did you feel while you were delivering this sermon?
2. How would you describe the atmosphere in the worship space as you were preaching?
3. How did you feel right after you finished preaching?
4. What feedback did you receive from worshippers
 - during your delivery?
 - as they left the sanctuary?
 - during fellowship time?
5. What was the quality of
 - your voice?
 - eye contact?
 - gestures?
 - pacing?

(If you video recorded your sermon, view it and reassess these things.)
6. How successfully did your sermon connect with the lives of the worshippers? Explain.
7. What was the good news that worshippers might have heard?
8. What might worshippers try to do “going out into the world” after hearing this sermon?
9. What do you think were the main strengths of this sermon? *(Check all that apply.)*
 - Clear focus on God
 - Well-organized
 - Well-researched
 - Writing/language (e.g., clear, understandable)
 - Scripture retelling and/or analysis
 - Understanding of the worshippers’ context
 - Introduction
 - Conclusion
 - Illustrations, storytelling
 - Clear message of good news and hope
 - Relevancy
 - Delivery
 - Other. Describe:
10. What change(s) would you make to this sermon and preaching experience if you were to do it again?

EVALUATION FORM B – FOR WORSHIPPERS

The preacher requests that you, along with a few other worshippers, give feedback on his/her sermon today – to help to improve the quality of future sermons. Please answer the questions honestly. You are not asked to give your name. Please fold and leave on your seat or hand to the preacher or an elder after the service.

1. How did you feel while listening to this sermon?
2. How did you feel when the sermon ended?
3. What did you most appreciate about this sermon?
4. In one or two sentences, summarize the sermon's main point.
5. What do you think were the main strengths of this sermon? *(Check all that apply.)*
 - The focus on God active today in the world
 - Organization/structure (e.g., a beginning, middle, end)
 - Informative
 - Writing/language (e.g., clear, understandable)
 - Scripture retelling and/or analysis (e.g., clear explanation of passage)
 - Inspiring
 - Introduction
 - Conclusion
 - Illustrations/Storytelling
 - Message of good news and hope
 - Relevant theme (e.g., for the audience, contemporary culture)
 - Delivery
 - Other. Describe:
6. Regarding the quality and style of the presentation:

■ Could you hear every word?	Yes	No
■ Was the pacing just right (i.e., not too slow or fast)	Yes	No
■ Was there sufficient eye contact?	Yes	No
■ Were gestures appropriate and helpful?	Yes	No
■ Other comments or suggestions:		
7. What one thing could improve this sermon?
8. What did this sermon say about God (and/or Jesus, the Holy Spirit)?
9. How might this sermon affect the way you live in the coming days?
10. Other comments and suggestions:

CONCLUSION

The task of learning to preach is never complete. Our character as a preacher is never finished. To preach is to engage in an ongoing transformation, in which God will shape and form you and the community or communities in which you preach. As time goes by, your preaching will improve, especially as you take the opportunity to evaluate and reflect upon the quality of your sermons and seek feedback from people you respect and trust. There may be times when you are surprised by silence and speechlessness, when you can't hear what God is saying. There may be times when you will feel the Holy Spirit tingling in the air as your preach. There may be times when you will decide that your preaching style needs to change entirely.

With this handbook, you have at your fingertips the basic steps for preparing, writing and delivering sermons. But it is the beginning of a journey, not the end.

A preacher's blessing

Friends,
be affirmed
that God equips us,
women and men
like you and me
to speak a word that matters.
Be encouraged,
for the Holy Spirit hovers near.
Be certain,
that the love of God in Jesus Christ
will continue
to transform you.
Amen.

Appendix

PREACHING PRACTICE – REFLECTIONS AND RESOURCES FOR INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS

REFLECTION ONE

How do you think sermons reflect the time in which they are preached?

Find on the Internet or in a library two of the following sermons to study:

- Acts 2:14–39 (first century and New Testament period)
- a sermon by Jonathan Edwards (18th century)
- a sermon by Martin Luther King Jr. or Billy Graham (1950s, 1960s)
- a sermon by a renown 21st century preacher (e.g., Fred Craddock, Barbara Brown Taylor, Rick Warren, William H. Willimon)

In what ways do these sermons reflect the social and political context of the time in which they were preached?

How would the same sermon be heard today?

Suggested Readings

Edwards, O.C., Jr. *A History of Preaching*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004).

Wilson, Paul Scott. *A Concise History of Preaching*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992).

REFLECTION TWO

What do you think makes a sermon particularly memorable?

Think about the preaching you heard when you were growing up. How did those sermons shape your faith and Christian identity? What sermons or preachers have you remembered long after hearing them? Why?

There are many sermons available on the Internet. Take some time to “surf” the Internet and select a variety of sermons to listen to or read. Which do you find most compelling and why?

Suggested Readings

Childers, Jana, ed. *Purposes of Preaching*. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004).

Lischer, Richard, ed. *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to the Present*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002).

REFLECTION THREE

What do you believe is the good news of Jesus Christ?

Read the story of the rich young man in Matthew 19:16–22. What do you learn about the good news from this passage?

How do you think the good news may be the same or different for everyone, and from one point of time to another? Reflect on and try to put into words what you think the good news means for

- you
- a particular person in your faith community
- a neighbour, colleague or classmate who is hurting in some way
- a person on the margins of your society

Suggested Readings

Florence, Anna Carter. *Preaching as Testimony*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

Hilkert, Mary Catherine. *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination*. (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 1997).

The Presbyterian Church in Canada. *Living Faith: A Statement of Christian Belief*. (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Publishing, 1984), Chapters 1–3.

REFLECTION FOUR

How do you tell others what God is doing in your life and in the world?

If someone stopped you in your neighbourhood and said, “Tell me about your faith”, how ready are you to tell them?

Browse a newspaper or news magazine for stories about people and communities. Choose one story and imagine you had the chance to speak to the people in it about the good news of Jesus Christ. What would you want to tell them?

It is useful to be able to describe and explain the basic aspects of the Christian faith. Prepare and practice an answer to one or both of these questions:

“What do you believe?”

“What is the good news for you?”

Suggested Readings

Migliore, Daniel L. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Theology*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004).

Taylor, Barbara Brown. *When God is Silent*. (Boston, MA: Cowley Publications, 1998).

The Presbyterian Church in Canada. *Living Faith: A Statement of Christian Belief*. (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Publishing, 1984), Chapters 8, 9.

Willimon, William H. *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992).

REFLECTION FIVE

What is the role of a preacher?

Think about how you feel about preaching and why some preachers find it frightening.

Reflect on your listening skills. What can you do to “tune in” to God? Yourself? The worshippers?

Make an appointment to have coffee or tea with

- 1) someone who has been a long-time member of the congregation and
- 2) someone who is a relatively new member or adherent.

Listen carefully to their stories and about their experiences in this congregation.

How might God speak to them through you?

Suggested Readings

Kim, Eunjoo Mary. “Preaching as an Art of Shared Leadership.” In *Women, Church and Leadership: New Paradigms*, edited by Eunjoo Mary Kim and Deborah Beth Creamer. (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2012).

McClure, John S. *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership & Preaching Meet*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995).

Taylor, Barbara Brown. *The Preaching Life*. (Boston, MA: Cowley Publications, 1993).

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

REFLECTION SIX

How will you choose scripture(s) for preaching?

Spend some time thinking about the world Jesus lived in and how it compares to our world today. Why do you think it is important to be aware of the cultural and historical contexts of scripture?

Choose a scripture passage and explore it following the six-step process outlined in Chapter Six.

Suggested Readings

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, 12 vols. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008–2011).

Long, Thomas G. *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

Van Harn, Roger E., ed. *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday’s Texts, The Third Readings: The Gospels*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001).

Wilson, Paul Scott. *God Sense: Reading the Bible for Preaching*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001).

REFLECTION SEVEN

What method might you follow to prepare a sermon?

Think about your past experience in writing (e.g., essays, articles, letters, blogs, sermons or presentations). Reflect on the methods you have applied. How satisfactory were they (e.g., effort required, time needed, quality of final writing)? What would you do differently?

The next time you attend worship, pay attention to the sermon's structure. What are its main points? How are they presented and developed? How did the sermon conclude?

Invite an experienced preacher for coffee. Ask him/her about the method used for preparing sermons.

Suggested Readings

- Allen, Ronald J. *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler*. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1998).
- Childers, Jana, ed. *Birthing the Sermon: Women Preachers on the Creative Process*. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001).
- Craddock, Fred B. *As One Without Authority: Fourth Edition Revised and with New Sermons*. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001).
- Hoezee, Scott. *Actuality: Real Life Stories for Sermons that Matter*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2014).
- Wilson, Paul Scott. *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999).

REFLECTION EIGHT

How will you know if you have preached an effective sermon?

What kind of preaching is effective? Ineffective? Think about sermons you have heard and how you “rated” them. Think about how the people you know discuss the characteristics of an effective sermon.

Prepare a sermon (or a detailed outline) and present it to someone willing to give you feedback. Use the evaluation forms in Chapter Twelve. Revise your sermon (outline) and compare it with the original.

Suggested Readings

- Bush, Peter and Christine O'Reilly. *Where 20 or 30 Are Gathered: Leading Worship in the Small Church*. (Lanham, MD: Alban Institute/Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).
- Fry Brown, Theresa. *Delivering the Sermon: Voice, Body and Animation in Proclamation*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008).
- Knowles, Michael P. *We Preach Not Ourselves: Paul on Proclamation*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008).

RECOMMENDED STUDY BIBLES, COMMENTARIES AND WEBSITES

STUDY BIBLES

Cambridge Annotated Study Bible (Cambridge, 1993) NRSV
HarperCollins Study Bible (HarperCollins, 1993) NRSV
New Oxford Annotated Bible (Oxford, 1977, 1991) NRSV
Oxford Study Bible (Oxford, 1992) REB

COMMENTARIES

The following commentaries are published as a series based on individual books or parts of the Bible:

From Westminster John Knox Press

A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV
Belief
Feasting on the Word
Interpretation
Preaching God's Transforming Justice

From Abingdon Press

Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries
Basic Bible Commentary
New Interpreter's Bible

From Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company

Discovering
The Bible in Medieval Tradition
The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary

WEBSITES

<http://presbyterian.ca/worship/>
<http://www.evangelismconnections.org/>
<http://www.textweek.com/>
<http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/>
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/> (*Leadership Journal*)
<http://www.preaching.com/> (*Preaching magazine site*)
<http://www.preachingtoday.com/> (*Preaching Today magazine site*)
<https://www.pcusa.org/resource/list/liturgy/>
<http://engageworship.org/>
<http://worship.calvin.edu/>
<http://www.workingpreacher.org/>
<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/preaching>
<http://www.wingclips.com/>