

A Guide for Preaching

By Martin Lohrmann

A week or two before preaching:

Breathe... Pray... Listen...

1. Read the appointed passages:
 - Read them aloud to yourself
 - Read them with a community or clergy Bible study group
 - Check out the Greek or Hebrew
 - Include these readings in personal prayer & pastoral care situations
 - Take notes about what stands out
2. Go about the rest of your life, letting these readings come to mind now and again
3. Ask yourself: based on these readings, what good news is God telling you?

As you begin to write:

Breathe... Pray... Listen...

1. When you have time and energy, start writing the story of this good news
2. Look at what you have prepared:
 - If you see good news there, find ways to make it shine brighter
 - If you don't see good news, ask yourself "what's missing?"
3. Take breaks so that you're working with good energy & perspective

As you continue to write:

Breathe... Pray... Listen...

1. Read the first sentence of each paragraph to see how the sermon flows
2. Read the sermon backwards—from the last paragraph to the first—for the same reason
3. Be bold! Revise, cut & add so that the gospel shines.

Note: The Holy Spirit works not just in writing or speaking but in editing, too!

Nearing your final draft:

Breathe... Pray... Listen...

1. Read the sermon aloud to a friend or yourself, hearing the words as if for the first time
2. What do you hear? What don't you hear? What gets in the way? What's missing? What sounds right and might even be highlighted more?
3. Revise accordingly, remembering that the sermon is not about *your words* but *The Word*

As you prepare to preach:

Breathe... Pray... Enjoy sharing the gospel

After you've shared the message, move aside and sing a hymn with the people

Appendix 1: Things To Avoid, for the Sake of People Listening to You...

Don't make your sermon illustrations and personal stories more important than the Bible, Christ, faith, the gospel, etc. They aren't. They can serve the gospel but they are not substitutes for it or improvements on it.

Don't say, "As I was preparing this sermon..." It shows that you haven't prepared enough to edit such comments out of your proclamation of the gospel.

Don't tell a story about something that happened yesterday, because—unless it's a recent news item like a natural disaster that deserves recognition—it shows you were probably writing the sermon at the last minute (see previous).

Don't say, "Wow, this sure is a hard Bible verse." A) Most Bible verses are challenging on some level; and B) you're a professional (or training to become one) and should have some ideas about how to handle challenging texts before you open your mouth in the pulpit.

Don't be the scripture police. Yes, there are many challenging and offensive things in the Bible. But these passages can point to the gospel by contrast, which is how the Bible itself often uses its own sharp edges: it turns out there can be a difference between the Bible and the gospel, biblical words and The Word! For instance, one passage condemning foreigners can remind us of other passages about love for outsiders. In this way, troubling texts can turn into great aids in pointing to gospel: it just takes a little extra work (see previous).

Don't turn doubt or cynicism into virtues. Preaching should not discredit Jesus, the church, or faith in God. Yes, a healthy sense of doubt can lead to honesty, new insights and growth. But raising doubt without giving the gospel is a form of theft, idolatry, and disrespect.

Don't write a sermon about the lectionary or the church year. The lectionary was invented for the gospel, not the gospel for the lectionary. Like the theological or textual study preachers do before giving the sermon, these things can play supporting roles without getting in the way.

Don't avoid preaching from the pulpit just because you think preaching from somewhere else is folksier or cooler. Pulpits are not authoritarian. They are furniture. They help you see your hearers and help you be better seen and heard by them. If you want to preach from somewhere else—and *there are great reasons to do so!*—please be able to explain why.

Don't imagine you know how people in the Bible felt. You don't know what it was like to be an ancient Israelite in the time of David or a Mediterranean laborer in the time of Jesus. It can be an interesting and helpful thought experiment but that's all it is. Own your imagination.

Don't imagine you know how your hearers today feel about things like world events or various personal experiences (see previous point). Instead, preach the gospel and let the Spirit work.

Appendix 2: Things to Do, for the Sake of the People Listening to You

Pray as you prepare and before you speak.

Seek guidance from God the Holy Spirit, the holy scriptures, and people you trust.

Approach God, scripture, faith, and congregational life with a sense of wonder and curiosity.

Enjoy wrestling with the beautiful, mysterious, head-scratching, liberating, thought-provoking, aha-inducing bunch of stories, sayings, and poems that make up holy scripture.

Use the same brain for preaching that you use in the rest of your life; for instance, by acknowledging science, using common sense, thinking before speaking, and practicing basic respect for all people.

Bring your unique self to your sermon preparation and delivery, even as you remember that preaching is about the gospel, not you.

Say things your own way, even as you consider how your words might sound to someone else.

Honor the longing to hear truly Good News that people of all walks of life bring with them when they come to worship, whether they're in church every Sunday or have never heard it before.

Invite people to see the world, other people, and themselves through the lens of divine mercy and the self-emptying cross of Christ.

Inspire people's worlds, hearts, and minds to get bigger rather than smaller because of faith.

Welcome people into a lifelong adventure of faith with God. Feel free to share stories about what this life-changing, life-giving faith in Christ has looked like in the witness of the saints who've gone before us, even as you recognize the diversity of stories that testify to Christ.

Take some pressure off the sermon by remembering that: A) the preacher lives by grace, too; B) your sermon is one part of a broader worship experience in which all the other elements exist to help proclaim the gospel.

Embrace the butterflies, fear and trembling that can come with preaching. If you feel nervous, that's okay. You're announcing God's word right here and now to a group of living people: it's a big deal! Rather than merely raising your anxiety, these butterflies can validate the importance of your work and propel your energy, faith, and passion for the sake of the gospel.

Let your love of God shine through! Enjoy sharing the Good News!

[Note: this happens easier when you are well prepared.]