

Last things: A pastorate comes to a close

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [May 4, 2010](#) issue

My last sermon at Covenant Baptist Church was on February 7, 2010. It was 20 years after the first sermon I preached for our community. I was the youth minister at the time, and the pastor was away. The only memory I have of that first sermon is a vague one. In my mind I can see the Duckblind Lounge, where we were meeting at that time. At some point in the sermon I looked away to the right and saw a kid in the back row, head back, mouth open, sound asleep.

It took me five years to shed the anxiety of weekly preaching and embrace it as a way of life, five years to learn how to take preaching seriously while not taking it seriously at all, five years to name the angel or demon (I'm not sure which it is; it might be both) that is the weekly collision of text and preacher, out of which all sermons should come. And five years to live fully within this ancient and esoteric craft.

Then one day I found that I was typing "My last sermon at Covenant" at the top of a page. I left my last sermon notes on the battered black music stand that served as my pulpit for all those years. I had a brief impulse to save them, as if they were somehow valuable. Then I made a conscious decision not to. I left them there, just as sermons are left hanging in the air. They are worth all they can be worth, and they are worth nothing at all.

Who can measure or know the meaning of the last time a sacred thing is done?

Our Christmas tree for Christ sits quietly in our church throughout the seasons of Advent and Christmas. We don't draw much attention to it. People in our church put little gifts for Jesus in its branches. When the season of Epiphany begins, I take the presents off the tree and put the tree away in the attic.

The last time I removed the Christmas tree for Christ, I found 12 grocery store gift cards meant for people who show up at our church in need of food, nine paper

angels made by the children in our youngest Sunday school class, and one can of unsweetened applesauce sitting under the tree.

Madeline's angel is covered with flowers and has purple hair. She wrote, "I love God and Jesus" on the back of it. I asked Jesus if I could keep that one. He said that would be fine.

There was no explanation left for the applesauce. According to tradition, it is a gift for Christ. I put it in my backpack with my computer. I'm carrying it around with me, hoping its purpose will become clear in time. Maybe in a moment of weakness, I will magically become "the least of these," and it will be for me to open and eat. I have an idea that, like Popeye's spinach, it may give me the strength I need.

The last time I checked the messages on the church's answering machine was the Sunday morning of my last sermon. I still go to the church to write, and I've noticed the light blinking. But it's not my place to check those messages anymore.

The last time I shined my shoes was a few months ago when I was only wearing them to church on Sunday mornings. Now I wear them every day, and they have become scuffed. I like them like that. Wearing them in that condition makes me feel like a writer.

The last time I hung the purple cloth on the cross over the fireplace mantle in our worship room was just before the first Sunday of Lent. It was my secret calling all of those years to hang the purple for Lent and the black for Good Friday. I got the purple cloth from the cabinet filled with candles, Lord's Supper supplies and other worship gear. I spread it over a table and smoothed out the wrinkles. After leaning an extending ladder against the wall, I climbed high in the air and hung it on the cross.

Once a year, from atop this ladder, I looked down upon the holy of holies, gazing with wonder at the debris from worship past that collects on top of the mantle. This year I saw melted wax from a Tenebrae service, black scraps from when I trimmed the cross covering on a Good Friday years ago, little purple threads from years of Lent, dried Easter lily leaves and, of all things, a withered yellow balloon with a handful of air in it. Sometime last year this balloon settled nicely into a hole in the wood and was hidden until I spied it a week ago.

I left the balloon in its secret place. I don't know how it got there, so it seemed presumptuous of me to move it. Whoever climbs this ladder next can decide the meaning and worth of the yellow balloon. Those are the calls the minister must make.

Lord, bless and keep the next minister, from the first time up the ladder to the last time down. Let him or her be a sensitive soul with a bent toward poetry and daydreaming, and a love of all things small and unexpected.