

Books that linger: Texts for preaching

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [May 1, 2013](#) issue

We wondered what kind of reading ministers rely on for inspiration or help in preaching—apart from reading commentaries on scripture or other materials directly related to the task. Do they draw on certain authors of fiction or nonfiction? Are they influenced by essays, poetry, magazines or children’s literature? Here are some reflections. —Ed.

For the first year or two of my preaching life, I lived in a constant state of low-grade panic. Those Sunday morning deadlines were inflexible and unrelenting. In my hustle to prepare sermon manuscripts, I often read indiscriminately, scrambling to find anecdotes to fill anecdote-shaped holes in my sermons. It was a terrible way to work, and it felt uncomfortably removed from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

I gradually realized that beyond basic biblical commentaries, there was nothing I could read in the midst of sermon-writing that could help me. Even great works of theology and literature were reduced to crude utility if I approached them seeking to harvest material. I learned instead to trust that I brought enough to the sermon. I didn’t have to ransack my library; the best books I’ve read stay with me.

I am haunted most vividly by the words of Eugene Peterson and Debbie Blue, of Marilynne Robinson and Anne Lamott. It’s a predictable pantheon; yes, the next name on the list is Barbara Brown Taylor. These are nevertheless the authors who have taught me to speak about the Word. I do quote them on occasion, but more significantly, I preach with an accent I picked up from their classic writings.

Read [all reflections](#).