

Lost in a sermon

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [October 29, 2014](#) issue



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When I was a little girl I often accompanied my father on the weekends to small churches in eastern North Carolina. We would drive through the humid Sunday mornings with my father's sermon folded up between the pages of his hardback Bible. The sermon I loved the most was "Lost in the Mystery of God." I heard my father preach it several times and I never got tired of hearing it.

I can see the manuscript of that sermon: the title centered at the top in all capital letters, the typed text double-spaced and marked up with handwritten changes. But I can't remember the words themselves. Like many books I've read and loved, I can only remember the way that sermon made me feel. It made me feel as if the world was opening up around me, behind and before and on every side. It made me feel a kinship with devoted people of every faith. It made me feel that God was shining on the surface of things but also hidden in depths beyond my reach. I would love to read that sermon again. But unfortunately it is lost.

I've asked my parents about it. My mother thinks it was based on a psalm, and my father says the sermon wouldn't seem as wonderful to me if we still had a copy of it. It's a better sermon in your memory, he tells me, than it was in real life. Yes, my memory is faulty. I'm not always sure what day it is when I wake up in the morning. When I need to remember how old I am, I sometimes have to do the math.

But my body holds deep memories of "Lost in the Mystery of God." The title alone evokes the crunch of our tires on gravel parking lots, the elder smoking outside the

church while he waits for us to arrive, my dad catching my eye when he steps into the pulpit, the backs of my legs sticking to the pew. In one church there was a young man who leaned forward to listen when my dad preached. He looked like he would drink every word like water if he could. Even as a little girl I could see that he was lost in the mystery of God.

I wanted to be lost like that. I still want to be lost like that.

St. Augustine wrote that it's more pleasurable to find something that's lost than to have it always in one's possession. He found the search for meanings hidden in scripture to be an inexhaustible pleasure because there were always more meanings to find.

But even St. Augustine felt frustrated that he could not remember every moment of his childhood. He studied babies to try to remember what he had been like as a baby; he interviewed his mother and his nurse. His childhood felt lost to him.

Augustine cultivated his life with God out of this sense of something precious lost. His childhood wasn't really lost; it was lost in God, who remembers everything and in whom, as Augustine put it, nothing dies. If Augustine wanted to remember his childhood—to know himself—he would have to become lost in the mystery of God as well.

My father's lost sermon sometimes feels like the crucial missing piece of my childhood. I feel that if only I could read that sermon, my confusions would be clarified, my theology renewed. If I could read it word for word, I would understand better who I am.

But maybe what matters just as much as the words of the sermon is the crunch of the tires on the gravel, the elder walking toward us, the look my father gave me, and my body in the pew. The mystery of God permeated all of this. I think maybe what my father said in that sermon is that we can trust ourselves to that mystery, that it is OK to be lost.

What can one do with a lost sermon but try to rewrite it? It won't come out the same as the original, but it didn't come out of the pulpit the same way each time either. Before preaching it a second or third time, my father made additions and deletions with a black ballpoint pen. Besides, as soon as a sermon leaves the page and encounters the congregation, it multiplies. One member of a congregation doesn't

hear the same sermon that those around her hear. I wonder how that young man leaning forward in the pew with his chin in his hands rewrote “Lost in the Mystery of God” in his own life. When I imagine being wholly absorbed, wholly rapt, it is his face I see.

Sermons are ephemeral, made to be lost. Even when the manuscript is preserved, the sermon preached in a particular time and place is mostly gone. Making a sermon is something we do together, preachers and listeners alike. All of us become lost in a mystery in which all is remembered.