

The guts of the passage

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

October 22, 2012



I love preaching. It doesn't matter if it's to a handful of people or a thousand who are gathered, I enjoy it. I love studying the history and structure of the words. I love putting them together into an artful form.

And I love when I'm exhausted, run out of time, and bang my head on the desk because of my finitude. I haven't spent as much energy on the sermon as I hoped, yet I'm at the end of my human capacity to prepare any more. Then when I deliver it, somehow the sermon is good.

I even appreciate the mystery of the preaching bomb. You know, when you work for a really long time on a sermon, and it just doesn't go over well, and you have no idea why?

Like any art, education can give us great tools to begin, and many of us learned the hermeneutical steps for preaching. Sometimes when I listen to sermons, I worry that the steps left us low on imagination. We have concentrated on the facts and history of our sermons, but we have not always been aware of its emotional content.

I'm Presbyterian, and in my tradition, we pride ourselves on the intellect and roll our eyes at emotional sermons. We think of them as (1) dumbing down content or (2) manipulating people. But ignoring the importance of emotion in our spiritual lives can make us... well... boring.

I can hear the resounding arguments—people who tell me that worship is not for entertainment. And yes, I'm sure this is the case, but even Presbyterians are not disembodied brains walking around. The text is full of emotional content and if we do not pay attention to it, then we're missing another layer of what God might be saying to us.

How can we mine that emotional content? Here are a couple of things that I've learned to do.

Connect with one character in the Scripture. About a week before I preach, I read the passage and pick one person with whom I relate. It may be someone in the crowd challenging Jesus, or it might be the author who wrote the epistle, or it might be the woman who hides in the background of the story. For a few days, I imagine what that person is going through. How is she feeling? How did she get to that place?

Like an actress with a bit part, I try to fill out the motivations and the background of the character. I don't believe that we can ever fully apprehend the intentions of an author, but it's an exercise that makes the text three-dimensional and it allows us to live into the scripture.

Read a lot of fiction. As I'm developing a sermon, I begin to draw from the fiction I've read. I realize that many of us cannot sit around for hours everyday reading fiction, but we can usually fit some in one way or another. I often read before going to bed or while I'm flying. I listen to books while I'm doing the dishes or driving in the car. I know some pastors who think that fiction has nothing to do with preaching, but there's a lot of fiction (even young adult fiction) that can crack open the history.

For example, I learned another dimension of the Roman Empire when I read *The Hunger Games*, a dystopian novel that is set in the US and uses the systematic oppression of the Roman Empire to develop the plot. Or the morbid brutality of *The Game of Thrones*, where the head of traitors were covered with tar and put on spikes, helped me to imagine a culture where crosses were put on the side of the road as a deterrent to political opposition.

Recently, I preached a sermon on Esther and I realized that I didn't know much about harems. So, I want to start reading up on them.

Make a personal connection. For me, this usually involves writing in a journal. Is there something that you have experienced that connects you with the emotional gut of the text? You may not want to use that experience, or you may want to write the incident in the third person, but it will help you to gain insight into the passage, if you're able to have some personal awareness. [Here is an example](#) that I came up with for the lectionary text coming up this week.

Involve all of the senses. I try to imagine the sights, sounds, texture, and smell wrapped up in the story. Smells in particular can allow us a nostalgic connection with the past. Hearing about different senses opens up another layer of emotion in our listeners.

So what do you do? How do you connect with the emotional life of the text and help make it vital for your congregation?