

On "the glory of preaching"

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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I spent part of a recent week reading a book about preaching. It had an impressive sounding title that included the words "the glory of preaching." I bought it on the recommendation of someone from my grad school days who had spent ten minutes or so listening to me going on and on about my what an unobvious choice I was for the vocation of "pastor." Zero homiletics courses, zero counseling courses, a whole string of academic classes on systematic theology, philosophy, postmodern theory, etc., an almost pathological fear of public speaking, a history fast-talking, stuttering, introversion, etc. "All in all, not the most obvious candidate to be behind a pulpit on Sunday morning," I nervously half-joked. "You should buy this book," she said. "It will be a great help to you."

And so, I bought the book. I even read parts of it. But somewhere around Thursday that week, I had to put it down. Maybe it was the almost impossibly lofty conception of the task of preaching (nothing short of a "weekly encounter with the God of the universe," the author said, "one of the primary means by which personal transformation occurs!"). Maybe it was the formidably regimented structure and schedule laid about by the author, with original languages and word/syntax analysis, followed by reading in multiple translations (six or so will do), followed by sentence diagramming/mapping, followed by commentaries (no fewer than three), followed by finding relevant illustrations and examples, and then attention to oration. Ideally, all of this should be done by Friday so that, time permitting, part (all?) of the sermon could be memorized on Saturday. Maybe it was just that I was feeling unusually lousy about the status of my sermon for the week. Maybe it was all of the above and more. But far from being inspired by the vocation of preaching, I mostly felt tired, guilty, and inadequate.

It was hard to see past the yawning chasm between the ideal I saw on the page and the reality of what my week looks like. To say that my week-to-week rhythm of writing sermons bears little resemblance to the preceding would be the height of understatement. While I am obviously reading and reflecting on chosen texts

throughout the week, often I will not begin to write until Thursday or Friday. I'm lousy at diagramming. Whenever I do a word Greek/Hebrew word study I seem to end up at the unremarkable conclusion that the range of meanings for the word in question is more or less captured by the way in which the various English translations render it. And memorization? Um, right. Often I am beating my head against the wall for a good chunk of Saturday, scrambling to finish, modify, revise, cut, etc. over breakfast on Sunday morning, and desperately hoping the church printer is working half an hour before worship begins. I wonder how *this* "preaching rhythm" would sell in a book? Not exactly glorious or worthy of emulation.

Every Sunday before worship begins I pray that I would speak truly of God. It sounds good. And I really mean it. I *really* want to speak truly of God. But sometimes a more honest prayer would go something like this, "God, I pray that what I offer out there today would not be an offensive stench in your nostrils. I pray that nobody who comes today will be harmed or confused by what I say. Please protect your people from my sermon today." This might sound like pretentious false-humility, but I assure you that it is not. Really. I think that many, *many* people who get up to preach each Sunday are only too aware of how inadequately they have prepared, of how easy it is to simply resort to platitudes or poetic ways of saying the same thing you have said a thousand times before, and of how little we actually know or understand about God and God's ways. Sometimes all you think when you sit down is, "well these dear people certainly deserved better than *that!*"

Is preaching an inherently "glorious" task? I don't know. I've heard some amazing sermons and some truly horrific ones. I've certainly contributed my share to the latter and I'm just immodest enough to think that I've gestured toward the former. I know that God can (and does) speak through both. I've preached sermons that I've been rather proud of that seem to stimulate very little beyond a smattering of yawns. I've preached sermons that I've been utterly embarrassed by and been told that they were just what someone needed to hear. Many of us remember barely a fraction of what we hear in sermons. Often what we "remember" bears scant resemblance to what was actually said. What can you say? The Spirit blows where and how it will.

I think highly of the vocation of preaching. I think sermons are important. I listen to a lot of sermons and am challenged and shaped by them regularly. For some people, the twenty minutes or so they spend encountering a text on Sunday morning represents the sum total of their engagement with Scripture that week. All the more

reason to approach this time with all due seriousness, skill, and prayer.

But I don't think preaching is everything when it comes to discipleship and faith formation. Not by a long shot. Many people will encounter Jesus more truly in a morning spent serving at the soup kitchen or helping out at youth event or visiting a hospital or listening—truly *listening*—to another human being's hopes and fears. Many people will be more engaged and transformed by taking communion, or singing a hymn, or walking a mountain trail or spending time in solitude and prayer than they ever will by listening to a sermon. And that's ok. It's better than ok, actually.

To borrow an image from Leonard Cohen, sermons can be one of the ways that the light gets in through the cracks. God can and does speak and move through human preaching. Of this, I am convinced. I am equally convinced, though—and profoundly grateful!—that God is far too creative and resourceful and persistent to be restricted to this.

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