

The meaning of a sermon

I'm sure these faithful people have heard all of these words before. So what is my task here?

by [Isaac S. Villegas](#) in the [October 2024](#) issue

Published on October 2, 2024



(Photo: allanswart / iStock / Getty)

On the Monday after preaching, as I think about what all of those words are doing now that they're out in the world, my mind wanders to a scene from Marilynne Robinson's novel *Lila*. The title character carries on an imaginary conversation with John Ames, the small-town pastor who will later become her husband. She wonders about the purpose of his work, about why he steps into the pulpit week after week

and tries to come up with something more to say, as if he hadn't already said the week before what had to be said about the same book and the same God. "What do you ever tell people in a sermon except that things that happen mean something?" she asks. "Some man dies somewhere a long time ago and that means something. People eat a bit of bread and that means something."

Her questions are my own as I prepare another sermon, this week as a guest preacher at a friend's church. I'm sure these faithful people have heard all of these words before. I'm confident that they know the gospel—that preachers, Sunday after Sunday, have shared with them the meaning of God for their lives. That Jesus, crucified under Pontius Pilate, was resurrected—and that those events mean something. That, at the Lord's Table, the bread we break and the cup we drink mean something. Those happenings involve us in a significance that we discover over time with one another—a communal learning, a growing into the meaningfulness of the gospel. The task of the preacher is to point out the connections along the way—to remind us that our lives are bound to God's life, that our world is first and foremost God's world, that the promise of the gospel includes nothing less than the liberation of all creation from sin's power to do violence to God's goodness in us and around us.

Preachers bear witness to God's life among us, to the God whose love is our salvation—a saving of our world and ourselves from our worst tendencies, our hell-bent desires. Lila is right. All we do is say, again and again, that there's meaning here, that there's a meaningfulness to this life we've been given. In Christ, God's own life is given for this precious existence we share with the rest of creation, a communal life held together in the animating and sustaining power of the Holy Spirit. There is something instead of nothing because God loves to love. To wonder about the meaning of things is to wander—with every relationship, with our attention to both the astonishing and the mundane—into the mysteries of that love.

The activity of preaching serves in the communal cultivation of wonder before God, which is the nature of worship. We gather to attune ourselves to the character of God, which we discover together in our turning to the scriptures. A sermon extends those biblical passages into our hearts and minds, into our lives—and through us into the world. These words remind us that we belong among the people of that book, the people of God. The rhythms of worship draw us into their story, which is also our story. Their God has become our God. Christianity is a bodily faith in which we pattern our lives through singing and preaching, speaking and listening, standing

and sitting, eating and drinking—all in response to the Spirit's movement, with our gathering as the collective work of receiving the word of God. The meaningfulness of the Christian life is discovered one week at a time in our participation in Christ's body. Worship is our exploration of God's reality made flesh among us.

The work of sermon preparation is part of that exploration. As I study the Bible passages for this week, my mind wanders to moments of learning, to people whose lives have taught me the meaning of the scriptures. To prepare is also an opportunity to take time for gratitude, to acknowledge the people in my life over the years who have tugged me further into the mysteries of God.

Sermons are produced through the involvement of a whole community in the life of a preacher. Voices from the congregation bounce around in the preacher's mind during the week, their stories enlivening the words proclaimed from the pulpit. Preaching is a ministry of the church, an invitation for one person to labor with speech on behalf of others for the sake of their collective embodiment of the gospel. Sermons are communal also in that preachers dedicate themselves to the study of a book, the Bible, which God's people have assembled over generations. The same Holy Spirit that guided the formation of our scriptures now inspires words for the preacher to proclaim.

The purpose of a sermon is to bear witness to the meaning of God for our lives. And that work begins with preachers themselves—with ourselves in our invitation for God to affect us with the gospel. "I must preach to myself before I can preach to strangers. The hearer must hear not merely me but Christ in me," says Baptist preacher and theologian James McClendon, testifying to the spiritual transformation involved in sermon preparation. "If Christ be risen (and if not, nothing finally matters) then 'Christ in me, the hope of glory' is my hearers' hope as well."

To preach is to risk the gospel's remaking of our lives. A sermon begins before we make our way into the pulpit.