

Words to Ourselves: What Preachers Use to Guide Their Preaching

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Whether they are formalized or not, each preacher has some “rules of the road,” some list of do’s and don’ts, a set of values, aspirations, cautions, or goals in their preaching. To try to bring some of these (by no means an exhaustive list) to the surface, we reached out to over seventy preachers, representing diverse backgrounds of race, gender, denomination, generation, tradition, and theological orientation.

The question we asked: **As a preacher, what are your “rules of the road”? In other words, when you approach your preaching, what are things you most keep in mind—either things you make sure you attend to in your preaching or things you try to stay away from?**

The words these preachers offered were decidedly words to *themselves*. No one shared them as anything other than personal admonitions. In these diverse and abundant “rules for the road,” some diverged from one another, and others were, of course, particular to the preacher’s ministry setting. But among the responses, we were able to identify clear threads of common values.

1. **God.** We preach to tell of the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ. Preaching needs to focus on how God is described. Sermons should attend to the reality of God and invite others to wonder with the preacher about who God is and how God is active in our lives and the life of the world. As one colleague offered:
 - *People don’t participate in church to just learn about God, they do it to experience God.*
 Several others responded in a similar spirit:
 - *Preaching should remind myself and others that God is the center of the universe (and not me).*
 - *Put God in the lead. For me personally, I need the sermon to name for me what God is doing and/or has done, and then help me see the way to respond. I sometimes ask myself, especially when I listen to sermons, does a living God make any difference to this sermon?*
2. **Hope.** In a culture awash in despair and isolation, the church has a crucial word of hope and love to offer. The magnitude of the force of that despair in daily life can intimidate even the best preachers into holding back from offering a full-throated expression of God’s power and presence. Who are we to stand in this chasm of need with ... mere words?

But the boldness of our proclamation has never been more needed.

- *I try to pay attention to what I call “hidden hope”—preaching that helps us look for places where we wrongly assume God will not—or cannot—show up.*

Several colleagues described how they remind themselves not to fall into the trap of a muted or diluted message of hope:

- *I never want to preach a sermon that is basically a shallow inspirational speech. Is what this sermon says “too small” compared to the breadth and depth of the imagination of God?*
- *The Gospel is a hopeful message—regardless of how tough the text or challenging the circumstances, the Gospel is a hopeful response!*

And finally:

- *I am constantly mindful that, as a listener, if a sermon doesn't invite me to think for myself, doesn't even try to take me somewhere thrilling (I mean, come on: we're talking about a personal relationship with the Creator of the universe), if it doesn't open up for me any holy mystery to engage with or any challenge to contend with in a spiritual context that practically forces me to think about the quality of my relationship with God or my response to it, I find it an aggravating, alienating waste of time.*

- 3. Formation.** While preaching is about curating an experience of God, part of experiencing God is building on that experience to craft a durable foundation of faith. The era has passed when participants engaged multiple times a week—a small group, an educational offering, kids at youth group, etc.—so that worship and preaching has become one of the prime (and for some, only) place for formation. Preachers get the privilege of a long-term theological conversation with a particular group of people, especially as that conversation intersects, day by day, with life's losses and global challenges. The urgency and primacy of using preaching in service of faith formation surfaced in diverse ways. One colleague offered this joyful rule for their own writing:

- *Help them fall in love with the biblical text, make it intriguing, mesmerizing, and relevant.*

The way preachers took up the task of faith formation varied, but the theme was consistent:

- *I try to remember that most of my people don't know the Bible stories we often think everybody knows.*
- *I work to make sure my sermons speak to the head, the heart, and the will.*

- *Does this sermon have any relevance to the seven day a week life of the laity. Are we equipping them to flourish as disciples and to enter into their missional calling?*

4. Disruption and Comfort. The constant challenge of balancing the prophetic word and pastoral word came through loud and clear. There were self-cautions ...

- *to not sand down the rough edges of the text*

and to remember that ...

- *preaching should destabilize and disrupt, leaving more questions than answers;*
- *no Christian sermon has more bad news than good news;*
- *I always think about the person who is hurting.*

It was clear from all the responses that this is a complex area of overlapping values and challenges.

- *I increasingly believe that most people showing up on a Sunday are carrying all kinds of hidden suffering and long for hope. Additionally, I want people to see that the kingdom of God touches everything ... challenging, affirming, inviting to new depths. It's personal and public. But even in my preaching I try to have more of a "centered set" ethos ... draw people to Jesus, nurture an encounter with Jesus, and see what happens.*

One contributor put it directly:

- *If my sermon won't land with someone who has recently experienced suffering, I shouldn't preach it.*

In a time when there is so much brokenness in our world and communities, balancing a comforting word to those suffering with a message of truth and justice describing how God seeks to set the world right takes care, understanding, and courage. A helpful word on this was offered by one colleague:

- *I'm not interested in saying "be courageous." I'd rather invite people to receive courage because of what God is doing.*

5. Proclaim. Proclamation does not necessarily mean a twenty-minute monologue, delivered from a high pulpit with a booming voice. In our context, proclamation means everything we do to share the good news of hope and life given to us by God in Jesus Christ. One respondent said that their "rule" is,

- *Am I offering generally good news or am I spouting moralism?*

Our colleague and JP partner Tom Long shared,

- *I remind myself that biblical texts are not jewel boxes with wonderful things inside, but events in the consciousness of faith.*

These texts exert claims upon us, and my job is to proclaim them, not merely explain them. As a preacher, I am in the news division of the church, and, whatever else there might be in my sermon, there should always be an element of “Something has happened! God has surprised us again! News! Good news!”

- 6. So What?** Among the most helpful values offered was for preachers to ask themselves this simple question when they have finished preparing a sermon: “So what?” Why does this matter? Where does it land in our lives? Where might this sermon change us? Invite us? Comfort us? Move us?

- *[I try to remember that] sermons are life purposing. They express Jesus’s call and vocation—and ours. Authentic preaching goes beyond “That was then; take a look.” After Jesus’s “Come,” there is always his “Go!”*

And one preacher summarized:

- *Clearing the “so what” standard is so important to me. Some weeks I don’t succeed answering this as well as I had hoped, but I ask it every time.*

7. Who is listening?

- *As I preach weekly, I try to be intentional in asking about the people in my congregation: What are they facing? What gives them life? What makes them afraid? Some weeks, especially when I’m stuck, I will go into our worship space, and I will sit in the chair of my brother or sister and try to imagine their joys and challenges.*
- *There was a keen value placed on giving attention to those who sit and listen to our sermons and not just trying to preach “evergreen” sermons that could be preached anywhere or any time. And, pointing to an ongoing challenge of preaching in our culture,*
- *Who is my audience and what is taking place in culture at this moment? A sermon on tithing in the weekend of George Floyd’s death just isn’t wise. I only alter my preaching plan if the culture event is major.*

(There is so much more to explore on that last point, We are planning an article in an upcoming issue of *JP* on that very challenge—how does one preach in a culture where injustice crowds out worship with tragic regularity.)

8. Preaching to “the fringes.”

Preachers offered a real awareness of who is not present—or barely present—as they preach and how should that shape their preaching.

Preaching is not an “inside task.” Just as churches must learn to play “away games” in the whole of our ministry, there were many respondents who seek to remind themselves of that each week as they preach.

- *I must be mindful of the person in the room for whom it may be their first time in church.*
- *Write for those on the fringes; resist the temptation to speak to insiders. People on the fringes include those who have been hurt by church, those with questions, and those who have never heard a sermon before.*
- *I steer away from anything that encourages (denominational) groupthink. Such as assuming there are no shades of gray to the Dobbs decision, to medical care for trans youth, or that hell doesn't exist, etc.*
- *I try to think like the biggest skeptic in the room, then find the hope that the passage offers to a world of brokenness. I always leave the congregation with hope, but we may go on a journey to get there.*
- *My personal ethic in preaching is first to do no harm. I am often led to challenge, uproot, and cast down, and I want to do this boldly and prophetically, but not harmfully.*

9. When all is said and done, preaching is the work of God's Spirit. We were gifted with so much wisdom on this point.

- *Hold on but not tightly. I have spent time preparing and praying so I have an outline in my mind and manuscript on the lectern, but I hold them loosely so that the Holy Spirit has room to lead the sermon.*
- *I have to talk about God; I cannot talk about God. If I neglect the obligation, Christ stays on the periphery. If I forget the inability, I become Pat Robertson or the Taliban. All I can do is speak up, laugh at the absurdity, and give God the glory.*
- *Remember that great line from the Second Helvetic Confession: “The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God.” Allow that thought to both frighten and uphold you.*

One preacher remembered ...

- *the musing of Fred Craddock that “the longest journey we ever make is from the head to the heart” and the importance of trusting that to the critical work of the Spirit.*

And, crucially, this word of hope and comfort for preachers:

- *I prepare a sermon with all the time, effort, struggle, and care that the important nature of the work demands, and then I get*

up in the pulpit and breathe a sigh of relief because it's all up to God in the end.

10. Finally, there is the toolbox of guidelines. Perhaps not all big enough to be themes, but interesting ideas to share nonetheless in service of encouraging conversation about preaching.

- *Don't be ever be a hero in a story you tell in a sermon.*
- *Don't bore people to death!*
- *How can I communicate in a way that is easily comprehensible, creative, relevant and, whenever possible, fun.*
- *Whenever possible, show don't tell. Don't over explain. (And that will help us not bore people to death.)*
- *Be honest and don't lie.*
- *Edit. Edit. Edit. Edit again.*
- *I'm struck by the fact I've never seen an editing class in any seminary curricula. Why? We as clergy might be able to write great sermons, but every single one of us can use an editor.*
- *I have one just-before-worship practice: I always preach it once from the pulpit before the service. It's amazing at what I cut and what seems less important from that space than from the coffee shop or my living room when I'm writing.*
- *Don't condescend to your listeners. Treat them like adults.*
- *Don't offer yourself as "the authority" on anything.*
- *Nothing has improved my preaching more than giving up the need to sound smart.*
- *I try to resist the "expert upfront" model of preaching whenever possible for several reasons. I most often do so by preaching in conversation or dialogue, and I endeavor to do so with someone who occupies different identities from my own.*
- *Think carefully, creatively, and intentionally about your first sentence and your last sentence. Please don't begin a sermon with some version of "as I was thinking this week about what to say." That is lazy writing.*
- *At the end of a sermon, don't close the door unless the text is conclusive. Most sermons should not have a conclusion. Trust that the Spirit authors the conclusion of the sermon and its application, maybe on a Tuesday morning and maybe a year later. A sermon isn't a well composed essay or a perfect argument.*

So many colleagues coalesced around these values in their sharing with us. Of course there is room for so many more, and some that may be essential to you were left out. But surfacing what is often unspoken and out of sight as to values in preaching—those things that just roll around in your head on a Thursday afternoon in front

of your computer—is important. These values, too, leave plenty of room for discussion and different views. Is it all right to use personal stories—or stories about my family—in the pulpit ... or not? (If it is, how many and how often?) What are the best cultural references ... poems, fiction, movies, blogs, music? Series or lectionary? There were many ideas and questions like these that we will explore in greater depth in upcoming issues of *JP*.

It is clear in the wisdom shared that, even in fractious times, we are blessed by thoughtful pastors serving faithfully in pulpits and in so many other arenas of ministry. We are reminded that, these pastors are ... well, pastors. Whatever their various homiletical convictions, preachers are called to be pastors who attend to the regular, disciplined scholarship that enables faithful preaching to emerge. But virtually everything else that a pastor encounters across the week might also feed the insights of a sermon. News accounts or novels or plays or Netflix or stray conversations one hears on a street corner: paying attention to all of this is essential to enabling one to be a good and effective pastor and preacher. Pastoral gear also includes all the rhythms of ministry: visiting parishioners in the hospital or the nursing home, sending a card to a grieving family, checking in with a couple enduring tough times, inviting to lunch someone who has not been seen for a while. Another part of the pastoral gear includes finding fellowship with trustworthy neighboring pastors or other friends with whom one can relax and can enjoy unguarded moments. Such moments enable the pastor to remain attentive to all the dimensions of the pastoral life. All these moments find their way, in one manner or another, into the sermons we preach.

Each of the responses from preachers either explicitly or implicitly framed a challenge: How do preachers bring their best selves to this important moment and do it in such a way that they are not the center of attention? In our culture, few are invited to be the only one speaking to a group for ten-twenty minutes while everyone else (presumably) listens. Yet preachers are asked to do just this each week. To focus the time and attention of a group of people on his or her words. In order to fulfill this call, preachers need to bring remarkable passion, preparation, and insight to their task—and at the same time to point relentlessly beyond themselves to the gospel. To raise up the hope and love provided by God in Jesus Christ. The Good News makes preachers messengers far beyond anything they can come up with on their own.

Listening carefully to all this wisdom preachers shared with us brought both of us—individually—to pulpits from which we preached early in our careers. One of the oldest churches in the Rocky Mountains (where Mark served) was built in 1893. The pulpit was nearly as old as the building. Carved on the base of the top of it—facing back toward where the preacher sat, unseen to the congregation—were words from the King James Bible translation of John 12:21, “Sir, we would see Jesus.” (Alas, this was crafted into the pulpit at a time where neither the congregation nor the woodcarver imagined the bold, faithful, and inspiring preachers who would fill that pulpit regularly in years to come and who, decidedly, were not “sirs.”)

“Historic” has a different meaning in the Northeast, where the fifth-oldest Presbyterian congregation in America, located on the North Shore of Long Island, was established in 1660 (Ted served there early in his pastoral career). It was a beautiful building and looks for all the world like a New England meetinghouse, gorgeously simple with its clear-glass windows, a soaring steeple that provided light for mariners navigating Long Island Sound, and an ancient cemetery that encircled the sanctuary. In the sanctuary, the pulpit is notable. Attached to the back wall and enabling the preacher to eyeball each worshipper sitting either in the nave or the three-sided balcony, that pulpit all but dared any preacher who stepped into it across three-and-a-half centuries to do so unprepared. A bronze plaque on the pulpit desk held the preacher’s notes and provided a weekly reminder to every preacher through the centuries, a profound caution and guide—the Gospel’s description of John the Baptizer’s pointing to Jesus in the first chapter of the Gospel of John: “He was not the light, but he came to bear witness *to* the light.”

Faithful admonitions to the preacher: “we would see Jesus” and “you are here to bear witness *to* the light.” All the guidelines, rules of the road, and lived wisdom of preachers help us to this point. To get out of our own way and let the Spirit work so that all of us may know God more clearly and experience the love and hope of Jesus Christ more deeply. Getting to that place with that wisdom is the mission of *JP*—and seems to us to be the ultimate faithful admonition embodied in each of these “rules of the road.”