

“Practical and with a clear sense of purpose, *Backstory Preaching* encourages preachers to embrace and embody their own story of God as a critical component of biblical interpretation and sermon preparation. Cressman invites a rather elusive yet much needed commodity among preachers—the integration of life, spirituality, and the craft of preaching. The result of working through this book will be a preacher with a renewed sense of call—and the skills to carry it out.”

—Rev. Karoline M. Lewis
Marbury E. Anderson Chair in Biblical Preaching

“Lisa Cressman has given us a warmly human, practical, yet deeply spiritual and refreshing reflection on the vocation of the preacher—a gift of prayer for us, really. She reminds us of the heart of the matter: the experience of God’s passionate love. Preachers, do yourself a favor: get this book and take it on retreat. It will warm your soul—and therein lies the key to better preaching.”

—Rev. Michael E. Connors, CSC, Director
The John S. Marten Program in Homiletics and Liturgics
University of Notre Dame

“Preachers who pick up this book will sit down for a wide-ranging, free-wheeling, vividly focused conversation with a colleague—one who *knows* firsthand, and who *names* succinctly not just the ‘in’s and out’s,’ but the ‘up’s and down’s’ of the vocation you share. With art and energy, Lisa Cressman has written not a *textbook* for preaching, but a *spirituality* of preaching—one pervaded with compassionate wisdom and practical strategies for soul formation, sermon formation, and the disciplined practices of heart and mind that bring both together in a lifegiving process of mutually creative nurture. Unequivocal about the demands of the vocation and the disciplines it requires, she demonstrates, with humor and insight, how the duties of preaching can become sources of personal delight.”

—David J. Schlafer, author of *Your Way with God’s Word*,
and *Playing with Fire: Preaching Work as Kindling Art*

“For every preacher who has wished for a trusted colleague with whom to share wisdom and insight about the craft of preaching, Lisa Cressman is a true find. An accomplished preacher herself, she writes candidly, conversationally, and compassionately—preacher-to-preacher, friend-to-friend—about both the stress and joy of crafting sermons. There is much valuable and practical advice to be gleaned in this volume, but the main virtue of this book is Cressman’s compelling vision of the preaching task, so deeply rooted in prayer and so firmly focused on the gospel.”

—Thomas G. Long
Bandy Professor Emeritus of Preaching
Candler School of Theology, Emory University

“Long ago, Aristotle said that one of the three key ingredients in an effective communication situation is *ethos*, the listener’s perception of the character of the speaker. Lisa Cressman goes significantly farther by emphasizing that the character, the person, of the preacher is formative for preachers themselves. We do not prepare to preach just by engaging in biblical interpretation, reflecting theologically, and relating hermeneutically to the congregation. We prepare for preaching by becoming people whose life is shaped by the gospel so that preaching is an authentic expression of who we are. The sermon embodies the person of the preacher. The book helps us preachers become aware in a critical way of the backstories that are at work in us and that inevitably contribute to our preaching, and she shows us how to deepen and broaden those stories through the practice of *lectio divina*. This volume will be a great read for the individual preacher, a wonderful resource for clergy colleague groups, and an excellent addition to preaching classes in lay preacher training, Bible colleges, and seminaries.”

—Ronald J. Allen
Professor of Preaching, and Gospels and Letters
Christian Theological Seminary

“Backstory Preaching brings sermon formation and spiritual formation into a richly textured conversation. Cressman argues that life-giving sermons emerge within relationships of deep trust, shaped by spiritual authenticity and truth-telling. Reading this book and taking the suggested practices to heart will not only improve your preaching, but may also change your preaching ministry into a life-long spiritual journey.”

—John S. McClure
Charles G. Finney Professor of Preaching and Worship
Vanderbilt Divinity School

“It is true that clergy who have worked with The Rev. Lisa Cressman and have practiced the Backstory Preaching method are better preachers for having done so. However, this is no mere prescription to heal what ails the preacher’s performance. Cressman invites nothing less than the renewal of the art of preaching in our time through the renewal of the preacher’s soul for the sake of the Gospel. Through the integration of one’s own life and spirituality into this vessel called a sermon, Cressman invites each reader and practitioner to discover that we ourselves are Good News.”

—The Rt. Rev. C. Andrew Doyle
Episcopal Diocese of Texas
Author of *The Jesus Heist: Recovering the Gospel from the Church*

“‘You’re the only one who knows God the way you do, the only one who can reveal God to us the way you can.’ This is the heart of this book on preaching. So much literature on homiletics focuses on the homily and ignores the homiletician. The Rev’d Cressman offers us a book that gives a word of grace into this omission.”

—Tripp Hudgins
Bogard Teaching Fellow, Church Divinity School of the Pacific
Berkeley, California

“This an honest book offering real hope. I look forward to using the big insights of this little book with both beginning and seasoned preachers.”

—Gregory Heille, OP, professor of preaching and evangelization,
Aquinas Institute of Theology

Backstory Preaching

Integrating Life, Spirituality, and Craft

The Rev'd Lisa Kraske Cressman

Foreword by Gregory Heille, OP



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*To my husband, Erik.
Thank you not only for my “seven years,”
but for more than thirty years of best friendship;*

and,

*to my Dad,
children’s book author many times over,
Robert L. Kraske.*

*When I was a child you taught me the value of the written word
and to trust my voice
every time you asked me to edit your manuscripts.
It’s high time a book were dedicated to you.*

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Foreword

This book about the preaching life doesn't shy away from the real stresses of a parish preacher's life. This is an honest book offering real hope.

With twenty-five years in the pulpit, Lisa Kraske Cressman knows firsthand the demons that can beset preachers who must produce yet one more sermon (and, for many preachers, so many more) each week. She compares the predicament of an early-career preacher to that of an imaginary violinist being told to play to a concert hall after only one year of studying violin. With one or two seminary courses in preaching, countless preachers are bewildered or overwhelmed as eyes and ears turn expectantly to them once again as they step into the pulpit. Speaking to preachers, Cressman writes:

When we graduate, though, the expectations are high. We're expected to play the violin beautifully, energetically, and in tune. We're expected to be expressive and creative, and improvise our own tunes on the spot for our listeners, just for them. And, we are expected—and expect ourselves—to do this every week, without further critique, coaching, or guidance.

A seasoned preacher knows that the preaching craft requires years of week-in, week-out work. To this end preachers need some help—which is precisely the coaching and guidance that Cressman offers at her backstorypreaching.com website and in this, her first book. But let the reader of this book be aware: the authenticity of Cressman's coaching and guidance stems from her honest confession that no preacher can sustain the discipline of the pulpit without first, and

in an ongoing way, experiencing a person-to-person, transforming encounter with the living Word of God.

Cressman's essential call to the spiritual life takes preachers to the very roots or origins of their Christian vocation. Pope Francis preached about this at the second Easter Vigil of his papacy when he said, "Go back to Galilee":

For each of us, too, there is a "Galilee" at the origin of our journey with Jesus. "To go to Galilee" means something beautiful, it means rediscovering our baptism as a living fountainhead, drawing new energy from the sources of our faith and our Christian experience. To return to Galilee means above all to return to that blazing light with which God's grace touched me at the start of the journey. From that flame I can light a fire for today and every day, and bring heat and light to my brothers and sisters. That flame ignites a humble joy, a joy which sorrow and distress cannot dismay, a good, gentle joy.¹

This good, gentle joy is the joy of the Gospel that lies at the heart of Christian discipleship and at the heart of the preaching life. We often are privileged to see this joy being lived by our parishioners in the midst of the suffering and the immense pressures of their day-to-day discipleship. And, if we can be honest, sometimes it is we the preachers and the ministers who want what so many of our parishioners have—a personal relationship with Jesus and a rock-solid experience of the joy of the Gospel. Like our parishioners, we are called to joyful, intentional discipleship.

Not only does Rev'd Cressman reacquaint preachers with this deep thirst for the very sources of discipleship; she also takes the opportunity to patiently teach preachers a time-tested practice for slaking this thirst: *lectio divina*.

In a way, while Cressman writes from within her Episcopalian context and never mentions Pope Francis, the whole of *Backstory Preaching: Integrating Life, Spirituality, and Craft* can be read as an unpacking of the following two paragraphs of Francis in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel):

1. Pope Francis, homily for the Easter Vigil (Rome, Vatican Basilica, April 19, 2014 [Holy Saturday]), at www.vatican.va.

Preparation for preaching is so important a task that a prolonged time of study, prayer, reflection and pastoral creativity should be devoted to it. . . . Some pastors argue that such preparation is not possible given the vast number of tasks which they must perform; nonetheless, I presume to ask that each week a sufficient portion of personal and community time be dedicated to this task, even if less time has to be given to other important activities. . . . A preacher who does not prepare is not “spiritual”; he is dishonest and irresponsible with the gifts he has received.

. . . To interpret a biblical text, we need to be patient, to put aside all other concerns, and to give it our time, interest and undivided attention. We must leave aside any other pressing concerns and create an environment of serene concentration. It is useless to attempt to read a biblical text if all we are looking for are quick, easy and immediate results. Preparation for preaching requires love. We only devote periods of quiet time to the things or the people whom we love; and here we are speaking of the God whom we love, a God who wishes to speak to us. Because of this love, we can take as much time as we need, like every true disciple: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam 3:9).²

Preachers who patiently commit themselves to a daily contemplative practice of *lectio divina* will joyfully and readily be able to give to others the Gospel fruits of their contemplation. Cressman not only makes this promise to her readers; she also takes her readers by the hand as they learn the Christian practices for doing so.

Like Cressman, Pope Francis also realizes that good preaching is not so much about oratorical skill as it is about prayer and about being transformed in a loving encounter with God:

Whoever wants to preach must be the first to let the word of God move him deeply and become incarnate in his daily life. In this way preaching will consist in that activity, so intense and fruitful, which is “communicating to others what one has contemplated.” . . . Today too, people prefer to listen to witnesses: they “thirst for authenticity” and “call for evangelizers to speak of a God whom

2. Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World (*Evangelii Gaudium*), November 24, 2013, pars. 145–46.

they themselves know and are familiar with, as if they were seeing him." (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 150)

I look forward to using the big insights of this little book with both beginning and seasoned preachers. These chapters show how the venerable Christian practice of *lectio divina* can help transform inexperienced, harried, or even burned-out preachers into disciples and evangelists brimming over with love of God and the joy of ministering the Gospel—preachers who can say with the psalmist:

I am like a green olive tree
in the house of God.
I trust in the steadfast love of God
forever and ever.
I will thank you forever,
because of what you have done.
In the presence of the faithful
I will proclaim your name, for it is good. (Ps 52:8-9)

Gregory Heille, OP
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Acknowledgments

I never set out to write a book, nor did I set out to create a ministry to serve my fellow preachers. But the Holy Spirit has a funny way of using the isolation of the metaphorical desert to build something new, even when—perhaps especially when—nothing can be seen in any direction on the horizon to walk toward. The Holy Spirit, then, gets all the credit for this book and planting in me the idea for Backstory Preaching, an idea so startling and unforeseen that it jerked me awake from a deep sleep in the heart of a winter’s night.

Each person who listened and took a chance to bring this ministry and book to life deserves profound credit for their intrepidity and trust.

Credit goes first to the Episcopal Diocese of Texas, including the Bishop, the Rt. Rev’d C. Andrew Doyle, the Canon to the Ordinary, the Rev’d Kai Ryan, and the Rev’d Beth Fain, none of whom thought the idea for Backstory Preaching was too far “out there” and facilitated the next steps. Credit is due too to the Bishop Quin Foundation who offered the seed money to launch this ministry. Together you afforded me the most exciting and fitting ministry opportunity I can imagine. Thank you.

The first two classes of the Backstory Preaching Mentorship, the Apprentices, and my partners, the Rev’d Micah Jackson, PhD, the Rev’d Cathie Caimano, Ms. Shaundra Taylor, and Ms. Mary Cromack—what can I say? You helped form and shape this ministry and pressed upon me the need to write for you what was swirling in my head. Without you, literally, this book would not exist. Thank you for your patience, perseverance, encouragement, and invaluable feedback, and especially for your friendship. I couldn’t do this work without you.

Introduction

It's Monday morning. I walk through the door of my church office determined to get an early start on my sermon. I glance at the Scripture lessons for next Sunday and groan: *The Good Shepherd? Again?* I slump in my chair wondering what in the world there is left to say about shepherds, sheep, pastures, and name-calling. I've said it all before.

Still, I buck up my resolve. *I can do this!* I will start fresh because I *will not* spend another night like *that* one, even though the nights like *that* one seem to number like the stars.

That night is the night before preaching, the night I'm too often thrust into "The PPZ: the Preacher's Panic Zone." That's the night I spend frozen like the proverbial deer in the headlights, staring at the blinking computer cursor, willing it to form pixels into letters, inklings into stories, and vague memories of seminary studies into profound theological insights that don't materialize, in search of yet another elusive sermon message.

The nights before preaching aren't supposed to be spent that way. They're supposed to be spent relaxing like other people do. Pizza, popcorn, and Netflix would be heaven! Instead, those evenings may not be spent in hell, but they're at least spent in purgatory while I wait. I wait to be set free from the panic of walking to the pulpit, hundreds of eyes on me, and opening my mouth without a single brilliant syllable prepared to emerge. All it would take is for the Spirit to make the message materialize on the screen. I could take it from there.

Would that it worked that way! I stand up and walk to my window. If only I had been born with a *gift* for preaching like those famous preachers who preach beautifully and effortlessly, who always say something that moves people, something that *matters!* Thank God, at least, my colleagues don't hear me. I'd wither inside if they did.

But that was then and this is now, a fresh Monday morning, when I link arms with St. Peter and offer my third denial in as many minutes: *Not anymore. I'm not heading into the PPZ ever again.* Hearing myself gives me pause: *Do I, like you, Peter, protest too much?* I nudge aside my misgivings to make room for my gleaming, renewed intentions and set them on my desk next to my coffee cup. I stretch to the ceiling and ease into my office chair again. No more procrastinating, I'll have it finished with time to spare, so help me God!

I return to the text. My eyes glide over the lesson again. I breathe deeply and ask the Holy Spirit to guide me. My mind focuses. *Sheep. Right. Shepherd. Yup. Sheepfold? Maybe . . . nah. Called by name? Did that last year.* My spirits droop. Adrenaline begins its warm-up jog in my gut. *Oh, no,* as I close my eyes, *not again!* I have no leads. I got nothin'.

Well, I *have* gotten an early start on my sermon. That's something, anyway. Now that I know what the lesson is, maybe I can ruminate on it. Sure, like sheep ruminate on their cud. (*Or is that cows? Is there something about ruminating that could be a sermon?*) I'll come back fresh tomorrow. There's still plenty of time.

But then, there are the expected unexpected meetings, pastoral visits, and sundry parish crises. I know I should spend time on the sermon, but it's almost impossible to make the time when so many other things have to be done. And it's not just finding the time. I know I should try harder, dig deeper, look for the tracks, find that dry footprint that indicates the Good Shepherd passed by some time back. If I could just hunt him down to hear the message he wants me to give! I guiltily put other demands off to spend a couple of hours searching for him, but I can't find him and he doesn't send a messenger to give me his coordinates. *Really, Jesus? Couldn't you help a poor preacher out?* I whisper.

It's now my Sabbath day. I should be re-creating my spirit, but instead I'm spending the morning translating Greek, listening to sermon podcasts, and perusing sermon links online. I'm tempted to pull a brilliant sermon off the internet, but I'm not that desperate yet. (Besides, were my congregation to hear a "brilliant" sermon, I fear they would question its origins.) I keep trying but I can't find that "nugget," that glint of gold that signals the "eureka" moment when a sermon message is about to be revealed. A headache and knotted shoulders tell me it might be better if I were to take a break and leave the house to

run some errands. *Or am I just procrastinating?* Refusing to answer, stomach fluttering, I give up on the sermon for the rest of the day.

Stuff happens, time flies, and it's now crunch time. I search for my favorite mug and fuss to make the perfect cup of coffee. Now, with nothing left between me and the last sign I had of the Good Shepherd's trail, I give in to the inevitable. I know what's ahead. Hard work. Lonely work. And it's going to take hours.

I don't know whether this makes it better or worse, but I believe the sermon matters. I want a great sermon because I want to share Good News, because I love God, and I love my people. I want them to receive a message of hope, love, forgiveness, and joy. My people matter and the Gospel matters, so my sermon *matters!* For that reason I want to deliver a *great* sermon, but, at this point, I'd settle for a passable one. One with an actual message. That I don't yet have. *An internet sermon . . . ?*

Here it is again, I sigh. The Preacher's Panic Zone.

Does the task of preaching sometimes feel like not such good news, like it does for this preacher? But what if it did? What if the opportunity to preach every Sunday felt like *Great News*? To make preaching every week feel like great news, it would probably require that we felt renewed by sermon prep instead of drained by it. It would probably require that our eyes didn't roll with boredom by the same Scripture lessons, but instead, widened in wonder to encounter the Gospel anew, even in the all-too-familiar stories. It would probably require, too, that the message felt revealed instead of wrested from the text, and we felt confident we knew how to craft that message effectively every week. And finally, to make preaching feel like great news, sermon prep wouldn't be buried by other priorities, because preaching *was* the priority.

That's what this book is about. This book identifies why preaching doesn't always feel like such good news to the preacher and gets practical about overcoming those obstacles. That's one promise. But this book promises more. It also shows how to integrate life and spirituality with the craft of preaching to make us the most authentic, awestruck preachers we can be.

What obstacles am I referring to? There are two sets. Let's talk about the second set first. These are the obstacles we have to overcome to

develop proficient preaching skills. If you went to a traditional seminary, the complexity and depth of each subject is so massive that most of us know when we graduate we're still in our infancy of learning. And perhaps for no subject is this more true than preaching. That starts with the fact that preaching is the only theological discipline that applies *every* other discipline. (That is, one can be a New Testament scholar without preaching, but one can't preach without being a New Testament scholar.) That means every subject that lacks depth of knowledge exponentially multiplies our ignorance for preaching.

Not only do we have to rely on all the other theological disciplines, we have to learn about preaching itself: what it is, what it isn't, and how to do it. We have to know the difference between a speech, an inspirational talk, and a sermon; how to conduct exegesis and apply hermeneutics; and when, for example, a pastoral sermon is called for compared to a prophetic one. That's aside from developing the skills of expression needed to preach a single, clear message that keeps listeners on the edge of their seats and sends them off equipped to live more of the Good News this week than they were last. Preaching is extraordinarily complex and requires more time, training, and feedback than any seminary has the time to accomplish.

Through no fault of our seminaries, we are so accustomed to swimming in this ocean of insufficient preaching training we don't recognize it for what it is. To put the limitations of our training in context, let's compare it to learning a different skill, like the violin, and instead of seminary, we're at a sacred music school. Let's be generous and assume we can read music before we arrive and are allotted two semesters for violin training. The first semester we learn a little about the violin's history, why it's played in church, how to hold the violin and apply the bow, and scratch out our first three-note tune. The second semester we learn to caterwaul our first seven-note tune and manage our nerves when we complete the requirements to play twice at church and three times in front of our class, each time haltingly and out of tune. The only coaching and critique we receive from our teacher is the three times we play in class.

When we graduate, though, the expectations are high. We're expected to play the violin beautifully, energetically, and in tune. We're expected to be expressive and creative, and improvise our own tunes on the spot for our listeners, just for them. And, we are expected—and

expect ourselves—to do this every week, without further critique, coaching, or guidance.

Truly, as preachers we hope against any hope to preach well because the deficiency in our training is nearly as equal as learning to play the violin in two semesters. Our lack of training compared to the expectations is as ludicrous as it is unrecognized.

Moreover, this problem isn't limited to new grads. It doesn't matter how much experience you have or how many times you've been in the pulpit; if you don't take that seven-note tune and practice diligently and intentionally, and no one gives you the tools you lack to get better at it, how can you? If you're only repeating over and over again the little you know, it's no wonder the thought of achieving excellence in preaching can feel like a hopeless undertaking, as if the Holy Spirit passed you by to give the "gift" of preaching to someone else.

Speaking of which, with all due respect to the Holy Spirit, the vast majority of those who preach proficiently are made, not born, because of three things. First, they pay attention to their craft and work at it with deliberate practice and feedback. Second, they keenly observe life: God's, their listeners', and their own. And third, they are intentional about growing in their relationship with God aside from being a preacher.

This segues into the first set of obstacles to preach proficiently, and that is—well, I don't know another way to say this other than to say it. The first set of obstacles is us, the preachers. That's because writing a sermon starts with *us*. A sermon starts with us as baptized children of God and with what each of us believes is the Good News. A sermon starts with us and our backstories because that's the venue in which the Spirit creates a message. Our whole selves walk into the pulpit. No part of us can be left out, and no part of the Gospel can be filtered out of the image of God we represent and its incarnation through our experience, education, and ministry context.

The backstory of your preaching is how you understand God for yourself. That backstory helps you articulate what you know of the Good News in the form of a sermon, because here's the short of it: if you don't believe the Good News *yourself*, if you haven't experienced God revealed in the text *for yourself* so you *know* it to be true, then why should your listeners trust what you proclaim? (And lest you feel

nervous that I am abdicating tradition and responsible scholarship and exegetical method, fear not!) Consistently effective preachers, then, not only work to overcome obstacles to develop their skills, they also submit themselves to the Holy Spirit so the obstacles in themselves are as few as possible, and they are made into the Word of God they preach.

Many preachers we naively label as “gifted,” then, in fact reveal truly Good News: *Consistently effective, awe-struck preaching can be learned by every preacher who intentionally practices the craft of preaching and integrates it with their backstory and spirituality.* Regardless of the amount or type of training we received, or how recent or long ago it was, we can learn to preach ever more effectively and with enthusiasm. And we can do so not only without the stress and weekly drama, but in the process of sermon prep, be renewed for our lives and ministries. We can all be confident, proficient, perpetually wonder-filled preachers.

If this is what you long for, do these three things: pray, read this book, and do the exercises. Because deep change and skill development happens only through slow, deliberate, focused practice, there’s a workbook to accompany this book. You’ll find it on the Backstory Preaching website at www.backstorypreaching.com.

The chapters of this book weave back and forth: One chapter about who you are—that is, your backstory as a child of God who happens to have been called to preach. The next, how to pray your sermon into being, so that you, the preacher, publicly proclaim the living God you know. The backstory chapters integrate your life and spirituality with your preaching, in particular by looking at the obstacles into which many of us fall. Obstacles like perfectionism and seeing sermons as products rather than prayer. Obstacles like not really, truly believing you’re loved, and preaching in ways to protect yourself from negative reactions. Obstacles like seeing preaching as a check mark on the weekly to-do list rather than the extraordinary gift it is to *read God*, so extraordinarily so, that you *can’t wait* to tell your people what you read of God this week! And obstacles like those represented in the preacher in the opening scenario—procrastination, Scripture fatigue, and not believing what you have to say matters, while trusting what you have to offer is enough.

The preaching chapters dovetail by slowly unfolding a spirituality infused sermon prep process in which you abide and discover

new Good News to transform you. Though this is not a new prayer method—indeed, it is approaching nigh on sixteen hundred years old—it may be new to you as a way to approach sermon prep. *Lectio divina* helps you discover a message of Good News you know is true because you experienced it. (Again, if you're feeling nervous and think *lectio divina* can't contain the sound scholarship of tradition and reason, I'll ask you to read the book, then think yet again.) *Lectio divina* integrates your life and spirituality with the craft of preaching. The stages of *lectio divina*, explained later, are prayerful states of mind to combine prayer, responsible scholarship, skill development, and the delightful element of holy surprise.

The final chapter puts it all together, your backstory with your preaching, and your life and spirituality with your craft. You'll be asked to think and pray deeply about developing as a preacher and then go beyond the thinking and praying to write a trust: a Preacher's Trust. The Preacher's Trust is an actual document you write and sign, to share and declare your intentions and practices to be Good News in order to preach Good News.

Finally, I want you to know the scriptural, organizing principle I have around preaching. With my whole being, I believe this is what we are called to do each and every time we proclaim the Good News:

"We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete" (1 John 1:1-4).

May it ever be so.

CHAPTER ONE

Preaching Isn't Performance, It's Prayer

Good News

The Good News is, through the Holy Spirit,
sermons are prayer,
not product.

Prayer

I pray you see that when you focus on the Good News in your own life,
you can preach the Good News for all lives.

Problem

We perform to protect ourselves.

Vision

When your sermon prep shifts the focus from product to prayer,
Christ reveals the Good News through you to everyone.

Chapter in a Sentence

First, we're formed; then, the sermon is.

Latch

A story

(The workbook to integrate this chapter with your backstory and preaching
can be found at www.backstorypreaching.com.)

Backstory

When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness (Acts 4:31).

The mountains! Who can't find God in gorgeous places like the Rocky Mountains? The quiet, craggy, colossal magnificence of them! The perpetual fluttering fans of billions of golden Quaking Aspen leaves! Who isn't moved to fall to their knees to sense the presence of God in such a place?

Uhh, that would be me.

Well, more accurately, I didn't find God where I *expected* to find God in the mountains. I found God easily enough in the mountains in Utah on the trails I hiked and ran as often as I could. Where I didn't find God was in the church in the mountains in Utah. Or, to get to the real point, I didn't find God in the preacher in the church in the mountains in Utah.

Right after college I lived in the mountains above the Salt Lake City valley for four years. While there, I attended a tiny Episcopal church of about twelve members. A hospital chaplain served as our regular Sunday supply priest. He was a great guy, ordained for twenty years or so. Pastoral. Smart. Caring. Intellectual. *Very* intellectual.

I attended that church for a while but then drifted elsewhere. Three months later, a member of that church asked me to tell her why I had left. After I hemmed and hawed for a bit, she asked me to be blunt. So I was blunt (and presumptuous): "I don't feel like the priest has a prayer life. I don't feel like he has any connection to the One he's preaching about."

It turned out that member was a good friend of the priest's. She felt she needed to tell him about my comments because he was the kind of person who would want to know. He would want to grow and learn if there were something to grow and learn from.

She told him, and it turned out I'd been right.

He didn't have a prayer life. He hadn't prayed regularly in years. He didn't read Scripture other than for sermon prep. He had fallen into a preaching pattern that allowed him to rely on his considerable intellect. He could preach about his subject. Or really, he could *talk* about his subject. He talked about Jesus in the same way as if he were examining fascinating characteristics of the Quaking Aspen. It was as

if he were standing on the street looking at the trees from a distance, vaguely remembering climbing the trails to be surrounded by their shimmering, gold leaves. Listening to him preach about Jesus as if he had once known him a long time ago didn't work for me.

I needed to hear preaching from someone who knew God. Not someone who had once *known* God. Not someone who knew *about* God. I needed to hear from someone who would recognize Jesus if he ran into him on the trail. I needed to hear how the preacher knew that Jesus was still alive because they had broken their fast together that morning over rainbow trout and an open fire in the Wasatch Mountains. I needed to hear his stories about Jesus going ahead of him to wait for him along with the summer grazing sheep, in the meadow so high up the White Pine Trail that they could look down on the tops of the aspens and fall silent over the beauty. I also needed to hear some explanation why, after seeing Jesus in the meadow once, Jesus didn't show up again as anticipated . . . as hoped for. I needed to dip my toe into the stream of trust that Jesus loved me if for no other reason than the preacher had learned in those encounters that Jesus loved him.

But this is not what the preacher preached, and I sensed he didn't know who he was talking about. As smart as the preacher was and as clear as his messages were, and as much as I trusted his scholarly and human integrity, I didn't trust his sermons because he didn't know his subject.

To integrate spirituality with craft, preachers need to know their divine subject intimately. That's why preachers pray. We want people to trust our sermons because they know the One we're talking about. We need to prevent our own sad slip into the theoretical because we haven't experienced the divine person. We need to prevent the hardening of our hearts that happens when Jesus becomes an *idea* instead of the living God.

Most of the time we have to be cautious about assumptions, but I think a fair one is our congregations expect and assume their preachers pray. I've never surveyed congregations to ask whether they actually hold this assumption so my own assumption could be wrong, but, I mean, don't *you* expect and assume that preachers pray?

Our listeners are right to expect us to set aside time to pray. To pray for them, for the church and the world, and especially, as the old story goes, "to look at the good God while the good God looks at me." To look at the good God is what forms us most as preachers.

Without regular, steady prayer, we lose our “why,” our *raison d’être*, our leitmotif for preaching. If lose touch with the One we preach about, we don’t know who we’re talking about anymore and listeners’ trust in our preaching declines.

To know *about* is not the same as to know for oneself, and it is to know God for oneself that gives preachers credibility. Yes, of course, there is the authority of the church which gives us credibility and the authority to preach at all, and I do not discount that. But neither the authority of the church, nor our degrees and education, nor the number of sermons we have offered mean a thing if we don’t fall to our knees in awe of God. If we don’t, we preach like clanging symbols instead of preaching like the living, loving Christ. Indeed, the relationship with God most conducive to preaching is vibrant, perpetual, cellular, evolving, and never to be taken for granted. We rely on Christ to be, exist, breathe, notice, question, doubt, ponder and understand, and only then to craft and preach.

So, prayer is our own “oxygen mask” that we put on before we can help others, because it reminds us of our *why*: why we are, why we were baptized, why we accepted a call to serve God in the church, and in some places, why we risk our lives to do so.

“But,” you might protest, “who has time? There’s so much work to do! If I pray for half an hour, there are vitally important things that won’t get done!”

No, they won’t. Not even Jesus got it all “done.”

Think of the work Jesus left “undone.” Widows still begged. Orphans still slept in the streets. And the number of people who were poor, powerless, and vulnerable to the Romans on the day Jesus was born was the same number on the day Jesus died.

And yet, Jesus took time to pray. Jesus still walked away *from* the needs of others *for* the needs of others. What allowed Jesus to preach, heal, teach, and verbally spar with his adversaries was his connection to his Father. His connection to God gave him the wisdom to discern what he ought to do next, the strength to carry it out, and the self-compassion to trust he had done enough for one day, even with so much left to do.

Of course, he left us to complete his work, with the help of the Holy Spirit and one another. He did finish his work by entrusting us with the balance, to preach, heal, teach, and confront the powers that be. Jesus left us the work to complete the reign of God on earth

until he returns, and regularly conduct ourselves the way he did: to walk away, be alone, and pray while there is still work to be done.

The argument you may raise is that we have a schedule but Jesus didn't. As far as we know, Jesus didn't have a daily planner. If Jesus lived a schedule like ours, his day might have gone like this: "9:00, Disciples' Meeting," followed by "9:30, Preach. 10:00–3:00, Feed Five Thousand." The feeding ran late (people stayed behind to talk to Jesus, so he didn't get out of there until 3:56). Because of that, his "3:30, Heal Ten Lepers" session started late, too, which also took longer than expected. Supper with his mom was nonnegotiable and he had to commute an hour each way, so by the time he walked back to the disciples, Jesus was beat and the day was done. A few mumbled prayers to God as he drifted off to sleep were as much as he managed.

I'm guessing, but I don't think that's how Jesus managed his time with God or his ministry.

Jesus didn't need a daily planner but he was just as busy without one, and anytime he prayed, he was leaving ministry "undone." People standing around the camels in the camel corral probably complained about him for not tending to their every need the same way our parishioners do about us in church parking lots. *Jesus prayed anyway.*

Eventually, so did the preacher of my mountain church. More for his sake than for my own, I am happy to tell you I returned to the tiny church in Utah a few months after the priest started to pray again. He stopped protecting himself from the vulnerable intimacy of deep gnosis with God. He let himself be seen by God through prayer and Scripture, over coffee, the newspaper, and art. He came to know Jesus again and was changed by the encounters, and his sermons changed accordingly. Now, rather than conveying a sense that he stood apart from Jesus, there was a gentleness in his demeanor. It was as if he had brought his long-lost friend with him to church, a friend whom he was both eager to introduce and a bit shy to reveal, knowing that in the revelation of his friend he would also reveal something of himself.

That priest's sermons were still really smart. But they also became beautiful, because they told us something new the priest had learned in the past week about his old friend that rather caught him by surprise. His sermons seemed to say, "Hmmm. Who knew? I thought you'd want to know too."

I did.

From Protection to Performance to Prayer

Eyes avert. Lids conceal. Cheeks flush. Words bump and clutch with “umms,” pauses, and diversionary explanations, as if the conversation were learning to drive a stick shift.

No matter how proficient the preacher, this is usually the preamble I see leading up to talking about their sermons. The more certain they feel about the sermon, the more averting, concealing, flushing, and clutching I see.

It’s understandable; I read this way, too. Preaching is one of the most vulnerable things we do. We expose our smarts, spirits, and selves in a sermon. As we walk to the pulpit, we might worry, *Does this sermon say anything worthwhile? Did I do that piece of exegesis right? What will people think of me? What would my bishop think of my theology? How will the “church tradition police” react to this? Am I going to put people to sleep? Or worse, make them mad? Oh, my God! what’s my colleague doing here? He’s going to think I’m such an idiot!* For some preachers, only the occasional sermon is fraught with anxiety. For others, every single one is.

We reveal so much of ourselves in sermons that some preachers feel embarrassed for having preached an *effective* one. Even though they never say the word “I,” they feel as though too much of their insides have been put on display. Because we share in public what we hold most sacred, preaching can feel as intimate as broadcasting a personal secret.

Yes, sermons make us feel vulnerable, but what about that vulnerability? What makes us feel exposed? What do we risk? What do we risk if we knock one out of the park? What do we risk if we strike out?

Here’s the good news, but the good news is so simple it’s hard to believe. What’s at risk? The Good News, the Best News, for preachers is, what we risk is not what we fear most. *That is, the union God forged with us through Christ is not at risk.* God bound himself to us through Jesus, and that binding will never be strengthened, loosened, or severed based on the quality of our sermons. Your best sermon doesn’t make God proud so that you’re rewarded with your place card moved next to Jesus’ at the next family supper, nor does your worst sermon make God want to banish you to your bedroom with a TV dinner. Your place at the table is already next to Jesus, the same as it always was, is now, and always will be.

The Good News is, what's most important is not at risk. Yet, if that were easy to believe, we would already. Why don't we? Our bodies sometimes reveal that we believe there's a lot at risk. We get clues whenever we flush with pride from a compliment, feel the glow of our own cleverness, or gaze from on high from the top-of-the-heap of our imaginary sermon competition. Or, when we shrink from embarrassment, are crushed by shame, or rush to the nearest hidey-hole, our bodies are telling us we believe there's more at risk in our sermon than the propagation of the Gospel: We want God to think well of us. And sometimes we want people to think even better of us.

Preaching makes us vulnerable. It just does and there's no getting around it. Preaching is vulnerable because we reveal our most intimate beliefs; plus we're on public display, ready targets for people's opinions about everything from our vestments, tone of voice, hair-style, weight, *and* our skills as a preacher.

To minimize our fears about parishioners' reactions, we might dress to specs, comb our hair, and draft sermon messages that rouse them to applause, or provoke only to the edge of withheld pledges. The problem is, as soon as we preach to protect or elevate ourselves, our preaching becomes tinged with performance, as if we were acting the part of a preacher. When we perform to protect ourselves, we're not preaching the Gospel we believe. We have, in fact, dis-integrated ourselves from God. We stand apart from the Source of holy words to preach the Gospel for a purpose: to prove we're worthy of others' regard.

Let me be personal for a moment. I feel vulnerable putting this book out to the public. I've never written a book, and I am little known in the preaching world. That causes me to wrestle mightily with the "Who do I think I am?" gremlin. I know I will receive a thumbs-down from some. I know some of those thumbs-down are not going to be from constructive criticism about these ideas, but rather, related to who I am. It happens to everyone who puts themselves out there. To make it worse, that criticism will come from people I've never met and with whom I have no relationship. I don't look forward to it.

The Good News is, I recognize my fear and vulnerability and don't want them to hold editorial sway over this book. What prevents me from caving to the negative reactions I fear is to write this book as

one long prayer. One long prayer for you, your preaching, the people who hear you, and the spread of the Gospel.

What do I mean, this book is one long prayer? The *Book of Common Prayer* defines “prayer” as “responding to God, by thought and by deed, with or without words.”¹ It’s especially important to grasp that prayer is responding to God; it’s never initiated by us. Jesus invites us perpetually to give our undivided attention, loyalty, and obedience to foster ever-deeper awareness of and trust in God’s bond with us.

If prayer is a response to God, then this book is a response to God as a simultaneous offering of deed and word. In the same way, our preaching is a prayer when our preaching is a response to God’s invitation to proclaim Good News.

Preaching is a response to *God*, and not to our real and imagined *critics*, when we re-member ourselves to God in prayer and Scripture, outside of the job to preach and lead worship. We need to sit with God in prayer to be reminded of Christ’s choice to bind himself to us, to let ourselves be awash in mercy, compassion, respect, and love. We need to bring fully to mind again the most important thing there is: that to be God’s forever-kin is not at risk. We also need to abide in Scripture to become newly aware that God is revealed most clearly through those who accepted the divine into their beings. Only by immersing ourselves in prayer and Scripture can we be formed until our sermons become prayer instead of a protective performance.

Preaching

“[L]et it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

Consent to Be Transformed through Prayer and Scripture, Daily

What reaction do you have to the idea of a daily prayer discipline? Do you look forward to it? Feel grateful? Excited? Pray without thinking because it’s already a habit? Or do you groan, feeling like it’s another item on the checklist? Do you steel yourself to the boredom? Do it because it’s required of you? Or rebel against it for the same reason?

1. *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, 1978), 856.

Or maybe you ignore it and pretend no one asks. I've felt all these at one point or another.

Although I don't have a reference, some years back the Lilly Foundation, one of the largest religious philanthropic organizations in the United States, wondered why many clergy didn't stay in ministry long enough to provide long-term stability to grow healthy congregations. They conducted a series of studies that eventually led to their "Pastoral Excellence Program."

One of their studies revealed this: most clergy don't pray. Harkening back to my priest at the beginning of this chapter, clergy felt the demands of ministry were overwhelming and they didn't have time. But for preachers, praying isn't in addition to the job; it *is* the job.

Not only is praying part of the preacher's job, prayer is in service of everything we do, including our preaching. Prayer integrates preaching with our life, and our life with preaching. All we are and everything we do reveals the Gospel because prayer is in service of *us*. Prayer is like a daily *Curious Case of Benjamin Button* when we reverse our age to return to the womb and Source of our being. Praying is our DNA's homecoming.

God yearns to get us all to Godself, to have it be just "I and Thou" for a bit. God might nudge us like a dad who says to his kid, "Hey, let's go for a walk, huh?" or a mom who says, "Let's play a game, just you and me." God's nudge doesn't always feel like a gentle invitation if we've set an alarm to pray and it intrudes when we're deep in the middle of a project. Just the same, God invites us because God wants to remind us of our divine-human bond. As we trust increasingly in that bond, we can preach that Good News of trust increasingly too. When we spend time with God, we are able to preach about someone we know. Not someone we know *about*, but someone we know very personally.

So, let me ask you this: Who is God? Not what you know of God from Scripture, though I know there are no sharp distinctions between categories. At the moment, I'm asking you to describe God (or Jesus or the Holy Spirit, whichever member of the Trinity you relate to most), whom you have come to know in *prayer*. God has revealed some part of Godself to you. Just as we can never know another person in totality, we can't know all of God. But what *do* you know? How would you describe God? How does God make Godself known

to you? What are God's attributes, characteristics, mannerisms? How would you describe the status of your relationship?

This is the God you are probably describing in your sermons, whether you're aware of it or not. Through my prayer I know Jesus as compassionate, surprising, "un-pindownable," demanding, loyal, merciful, and funny. After long and consistent experience, I'm biased to see him this way in Scripture. That means I don't preach "hellfire and brimstone" sermons because I've never experienced him that way. (That also means I have to do extra work in my *meditatio* when Jesus is angry or speaks of bringing swords [Matt 10:34]).

Similarly, how would you describe God as you have learned about God in Scripture? As with prayer, to immerse ourselves in Scripture offers us the gift of knowing God. When we spend time inside those biblical stories, we remember how God bonded Godself to us. We remember that even though we screwed up, God reformed the bond with us anyway over and over, until God no longer needed a bond but became one with us through Jesus, end of story, beginning of story.

This brings me to *lectio divina* (Latin for "holy reading") and why I'm partial to it as a Bible study process for preachers. First, *lectio divina* keeps us "right-sized" as an average, typical, run-of-the-mill human being who happened to be called to preach. And second, *lectio divina* immerses us personally and intimately inside the One about whom we preach.

When we encounter average people in Scripture, we get reminded the *average* person is the *summa cum laude* of God's purposes. Few were exceptional unto themselves or displayed above-average intelligence, wit, or exceptional leadership. The majority were regular people who were probably good at some skills and lousy at others. Jesus called fishermen to be his first disciples. Yet Jesus, a carpenter, had to tell the "experts" which side of the boat to cast their nets to find the fish (Luke 5:4-6). These fishermen, who had probably fished since the time they could toddle into their dad's boat, weren't asked to follow Jesus because they would win any fishing contests. Think about Matthew and Zacchaeus, the Samaritan Woman at the well, Mary Magdalene and Mary, the Mother of our Lord. None was singled out because they had a particular skill set Jesus needed to fill out his leadership team and reshape the course of history.

Moreover, Jesus came from an average hamlet from an undistinguished family, and by the very absence of any remark about his

carpentry skills, I infer they were literally unremarkable. Jesus wasn't even called "handsome," one of the distinguishing marks of God's favor in the Hebrew Scriptures. Indeed, those who were exemplary in the Bible, who did seem "above average," rose above the rest for one thing: faithfulness. In other words, their most distinguishing characteristic was not an *ability* but *trust*. They were exceptional in their sense of security in and their connection with God. When we pray Scripture through the four parts of *lectio divina*, we "embed" with these regular people who trusted God irregularly.

When we "hang out" with these people the result is to know we're not an exception to any rule. We are none other than the average human being who is skilled at some things and lousy at others, upon whom God took pity and is neither less nor more deserving of God's regard than anyone else. We do not stand outside the bounds of God's mercy, love, or compassion, nor are we special and get extras. No, we are just like all the other people in Scripture, and like all the people we preach to: human beings doing our best to make sense of life and God's work within it. We are no different from those in Scripture, nor are we different from the ones to whom we preach.

That brings us back to the second reason I'm partial to *lectio divina* for preachers: the first stage of *lectio divina*, *lectio* ("to read"), allows us to see biblical people just as they were and how God interacted with them. We notice, hear, and pay attention to them as if we were getting reacquainted with long-lost relatives. We pay close attention to what they said, how they dressed, what they ate, and what was left unsaid. This helps us understand our own faith-family history, but at first, only by gathering facts. We don't ascribe meaning to our observations, but catalog them with respect and compassion. In the same way that the observation of a photon will affect whether it is a particle or wave, when we first read the story we withhold judgments, conclusions, and assumed motivations so as not to affect the story as it was handed down to us.

Lectio is *really* hard for preachers. It's so hard this bears repeating. *Lectio is really hard for preachers* because we who preach are especially prone to assert meaning, to search for the "aha" that we hope signals the imminent arrival of a sermon message. And yet, when we rush the process, we miss so much! We miss the subtleties of the person's location, tone of voice, language play, and recurring themes. We also miss noticing those missing from the scene, those who don't speak,

and words we gloss over for having read them so often. *Lectio* enconces us in the “micro” view of the story.

Lectio divina is so helpful to preachers that I also suggest *lectio divina* as our personal Bible study away from sermon prep because most of us need the extra practice to let Scripture be its own self. We need the practice to see these people as their own integral beings, that we enter their world as a guest, and to see that these people in Scripture weren’t put on this planet for the purpose of providing us with a sermon two thousand years later. They lived their own lives with their own wants and desires, foibles and quirks, triumphs and revelations, and they deserve our respect as such. When we practice *lectio* as our own Bible study, we learn the value of doing the same in our sermon prep.

Lectio is the first stage of *lectio divina*. The second stage, *meditatio* (or “study”), is the hunt. *Meditatio* lets us wander down the rabbit holes of our curiosity. For example, in *meditatio*, we might pull out another translation to see whether a passage is worded the same way. We might wonder about a character and read her story from start to finish. We might be struck by the word “mercy” as if we’ve never seen it before and search the internet to find how many ways the Prodigal Son has been depicted in art, by whom, and when. We might also get curious about what’s happening in our spirits when reading these stories. For example, compassion might arise in us while we listen to songs of laments, or burst with indignation when we stand next to those whose demand for answers from God went unrewarded, or swirl with confusion when we walk with those who wandered in deserts past their endurance. We might also wonder how and why God reacted to them the way God did? And how did Jesus respond? And why did the Holy Spirit’s wind seem sometimes to blow only on the other side of the world?

When we hunt for answers and dig under the surface of the plot, we find these people’s stories are our stories, stories in which “there is nothing new under the sun.” Their stories of human existence are the same ones we tell today. Average stories of hope and death, promise and betrayal, insight and bewilderment, love, jealousy, forgiveness, war, unfairness, justice, and growing up. Stories of people doing their best, finding their way, hoping and trusting in God who didn’t

always make it easy for them to do so. Just like us. *Meditatio* lets us experience how normal the abnormal intervention of God-with-Us is.

Oratio, the next stage of *lectio divina*, is the "expression." During *meditatio*, we take in these stories and mush around in them until they become our own. But the process is not done if we hold them in. The insights need to be expressed, incarnated, made flesh. The expression becomes today's new Scripture, the new Scripture of this day's history of God with God's people, of God's history with you. This expression can be written, told, drawn, molded, sung, or stitched.

Finally, after *oratio* comes *contemplatio*, the last stage in which we "rest." We rest with God, sitting together in quiet, enjoying the very act of being together, of being amazed, of seeing the fruits of our shared time, and we are grateful. We see in the end that the best and truest part of life comes down to the simplest of acts: looking at the good God, and enjoying that the good God is looking at us.

I'll get more detailed about *lectio divina* in subsequent chapters, particularly as this ancient process is applied to praying a sermon into being. (If this is a new process to you, not to worry. You'll learn more about the how-tos shortly.) *Lectio divina* helps us know we are average, just like the people we read about. When we know we're just one more person through whom God does extraordinary things, we have nothing to prove in our sermons and no need to perform for the One who doesn't care whether we are average or not. God's bond with us is secure.

Conclusion

To preach effectively and with integrity means to proclaim what we know. The best way to know God is through time spent apart together in prayer, and by dwelling in Scripture. Prayer and *lectio divina* are the wells to which we return again and again to help us remember our place, like the Samaritan woman. Like her, we come alone to the well to meet Jesus, to learn who he is so we can tell the others. We tell others the stories about God-with-Us because we have experienced and *know* God is with us. We have seen God, talked with Christ, and heard the Spirit tell us everything about ourselves. We are formed so we can form a sermon.

Prayer, *lectio divina*, and preaching make us vulnerable. They're risky because we don't know how God will reveal Godself to us, the impact the process will have, or what we will reveal about ourselves in the act of revealing God. And yet God, who meets us in prayer and *lectio divina*, makes us realize we have no need to protect ourselves with shield or buckler. We only have to tell the story God gives us to tell. That's enough for any average preacher.