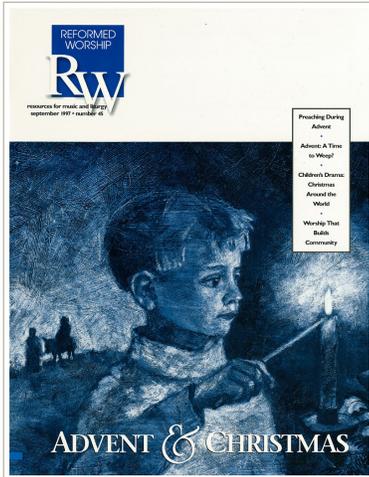


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PERSPECTIVES

Top Ten Ways to Keep Advent Preaching Fresh

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By [Timothy L. Brown](#)

RW 45

Thanks to comedian David Letterman, everyone seems to have a "top ten" list for something. With a touch of embarrassment for joining in the chorus and a genuine longing to be helpful to pastors who find themselves preaching in Advent "yet again," I humbly offer my own contribution: Top Ten Ways to Keep Advent Preaching Fresh.

10 Plan ahead and plan communally.

Do everything in your power to have your Advent series set as early as possible—the musicians with whom you work will love you for it, and you will sleep better. In twenty years of preaching, no inability or unwillingness dogged me as much as poor planning. I was always waiting for the "eleventh hour inspiration." The problem, of course, apart from the anxious worrying over whether or not inspiration will indeed come, is obvious—at the eleventh hour you have neither energy nor objectivity left to judge whether the idea is worthy of being preached, and no time left to change if it isn't. Take it from a self-confessed procrastinator: do everything in your power to plan ahead.

And let me hasten to add this—"plan communally." Have you ever hosted a "preaching planning party"? Invite a cross section of six or eight people whose input you value highly to enjoy a lovely meal and evening with you. Tell them the only price of admission is an outline for a series of sermons for Advent. Several good things will come from the evening: Folks will feel honored you asked for their opinion, you will gain an armload of helpful information, and, best of all, several people will be more interested in your preaching than ever before.

9 Listen to the stories of everyday people and be prepared to tell them.

Are you as impressed as I am with how quick people are to tell their stories? As a young pastor I would grow impatient, sometimes even bored listening to them. I had not yet learned how to mine gospel gold in human quarries.

Now, in almost every class I teach, I find myself saying that good preaching is always preceded by good listening—good listening to the text of faith, of course, but good listening to the people of faith too. In some of the classes I teach I ask students to spend time interviewing people "on the edge" at homeless shelters, nursing homes, detox centers, bars, and back steps—you get the idea. Almost without exception they hear stories of "better days to come." The point of this exercise is to train the ears of aspiring preachers to hear the kind of stories in which people find meaning.

Studies show that most people can't make significant life decisions until they have seen an example of what it is they could become. One of the simple realities of the incarnation is having, in Jesus Christ, a living example of who we ought to become. "Have this mind among you ...," says Paul. The

role of the preacher, especially during Advent, is to lay "our stories" alongside "the story" and let the Spirit do the rest.

Make a list of people whom you can visit just to hear their stories. Ask them to tell you about a time when God came to them in a special way, making a significant difference. Trust me—there is gospel gold in human quarries.

8 Sing your way into Christmas.

I do not have a musical bone in my body, but I have learned something from our sisters and brothers in more charismatic gatherings: "singing is believing."

As you approach Advent, select, as early as you can, the hymns and songs you will be including in worship, and begin to sing them yourself every day. Somehow—it would take someone much keener than I to say how—singing has a way of getting things into our souls like no other way.

Do you remember Wesley's rules for singing? Among them is this: "Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself, or any other creature.... so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when He cometh in the clouds of heaven."

And one of the rewards that "will be" given is given now—a heart tuned to sing the praises of God forever. Sing your way into Christmas!

7 If you have a knack for it, write a poem.

Someone has said that an ulcer is a poem never written. Maybe we could release some stress and heighten our joy by writing a few.

When I allow myself to move beyond logic to lyric, beyond propositions to poems, nuances emerge that can both clarify and bless.

On a recent trip to Israel, I stood in a shepherds' cave in Kokhav ha Shahar, much like the cave in which Mary gave birth to Jesus. It wasn't merely the pungent smell of animal urine and dung that made my eyes tear. Standing there, I was moved to write these words:

*Cold night, dark cave
soot from a thousand, thousand bedouin fires
grimly decorate the jagged ceiling
black canopy of death shrouds
Herod's true King.*

*Sing it in the Shephelah
say it loud among the people of the Coastal Plain
the Via Maris is a dead end
but another Shepherd will lead us home.*

That may not be particularly good poetry, but it is mine and it opens up a place in my heart. Write a little poetry of your own. It will help your preaching in a big way.

6 Make room for wondering.

Whoever said that Christmas is for kids only had it partly right—it's also for kids at heart. So if something of a child is still alive in your soul, then do what little ones do: Wonder!

Wondering is running to the end of our theological leashes and still lunging for more.

Wondering is pressing our noses against the glass of all that we know, only to be given grace to bolt eagerly through the door of faith to play in the fair fields of all that we can believe.

Wondering is the filament of faith carrying an energy of God potent enough to make our theology always and only a heartbeat from doxology.

Wondering isn't what we do when we have learned it all. It is what we do to learn in the first place.

Mary was filled with wonder. And why shouldn't she be? "Immensity (was) cloistered" in her womb, to borrow a line from John Donne. Should we be less? Let your inner child wonder again!

5 Enter into the ancient way of Scripture memorization.

A long time ago I was challenged to memorize the passages from which I was to preach. The effect on my life has been significant.

Everything about our crazy culture begs the preacher to hydroplane over the surface of "God things." But you and I both know that the richest and best "God things" are in the depths, and only theological denizens of the deep are able to find them there.

Scripture memorization will slow you down, open you up, and in a very unusual way, ready you to listen to the voice of the Spirit. When I went to seminary, the talk of the day was of "mastering the text." The ring of it was intoxicating. But we were wrong to speak that way. We should sooner speak of "being mastered by the text."

I am convinced that the best preaching is done by those persons who have listened most carefully, and felt most deeply, the biblical witness.

4 Keep it simple.

The most powerful Advent sermon I have ever read was written by Karl Barth for the inmates at Basel prison on Christmas Day, 1954. Barth did in that sermon what all preachers should do with every sermon: he humbled his great mind before the simplicity of the text and just explained its meaning clearly, word by word.

If you can find a copy of that sermon, read it and you will discover profundity in simplicity. Remember, preachers are not called to be theological innovators. They are called to be faithful. Keep it simple!

3 Feel the pain of those to whom you are called to preach.

Christmas can be such a sad time for so many. Rachel's children still wail in a twentieth-century Ramah.

Please do not overlook the pain of the parent who will not see again a child taken, of the father who cannot forgive himself for driving his son from the home, of the young teen who will not eat and her parents who cannot talk about it, of... The list could go on and on, couldn't it?

Joseph Parker once said, "Preach to the pain in the pew, and you will never want for a congregation." It may seem an odd way to stay fresh in the pulpit, but would we be well advised to overlook such things?

2 Take care of yourself.

The Advent season, coming as it does on the heels of a busy fall schedule, is exhausting. Give yourself permission to take a little time off somewhere before Thanksgiving. Take a hike, read a book, see a play, attend the symphony—do what you need to do to prepare yourself, body, mind, and soul, for the holy task of preaching in a season when people really are predisposed to listen.

And during the holiday season itself, watch how much you eat and drink and how much you sleep. The holy and ancient guild to which we preacher/pastors belong has never honored us for "muchness" and "manyness"—but more for depth and faithfulness.

1 Remember "The MAIN THING is always the MAIN THING!"

The main thing? "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

C. S. Lewis once said, "The whole thing narrows and narrows, until at last it comes down to a little point, small as the point of a spear— a Jewish girl at her prayers." And the prayers of that little Jewish girl echo still—and are answered still. "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Remember please that the incarnation of God begs for at least two kinds of responses from a people of God's own choosing. On one level it cajoles us from our comfort zones and demands that we be every bit as "corporeal" as God. Is anything more needed today than a new and radical "incarnation"?

Any number of studies now indicate that the young people of our culture who live under the unusual title "Gen-Xers" simply refuse to accept a religion that will not roll up its sleeves and go to work.

Frederick Buechner, with his usual penetrating take on things, writes, "One of the blunders religious people are particularly fond of making is the attempt to be more spiritual than God." If we blunder this way much longer, the loss will be felt at home.

On another level the incarnation begs us to take heart. The great sustaining prophecy of the centuries came true in a shepherds' cave in Bethlehem: "And you shall call his name 'Emmanuel,' which means 'God is with us.'"

"God is with us!"

"God is with us?"

Yes! And it makes all the difference. I want you to come with me to Butterworth Hospital in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It is Christmas Eve, just a few years ago. We are going to visit with a beautiful young man named Tim at the end of a long and arduous battle with leukemia. I hate that disease.

As I enter the room, I can feel death hanging on the curtains. Tim, once so strong and vital, now barely has the stamina to acknowledge my presence. After a bit he muscles up the strength to whisper, "Hi, Tim." I respond with the same.

A long, awkward pause follows. Twenty years a pastor, and I am still not sure what to say just then. Tim breaks the deafening silence by saying, "I've learned something." Now I know at least this much—you never trifle with the words of a dying person, so I ask gently, "What have you learned, buddy?"

Tim responds mysteriously, "I have learned that life isn't like a VCR."

Now I didn't "get it" then any more than you are "getting it" now, so I said, "I don't get it, Tim. What do you mean?"

He responded, "I have learned that life isn't like a VCR . . . you can't fast-forward the bad parts." As I sat quietly sipping his hard-won wisdom, he drew his next breath in pain to add, "But I have also learned that Jesus Christ is in every frame, and that is just enough."

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him 'Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'" Apparently, when nothing else is right, it is just enough to know that "Jesus Christ is in every frame."

There are only twelve Sundays left till Advent, and a long list of ways to stay fresh in your preaching!

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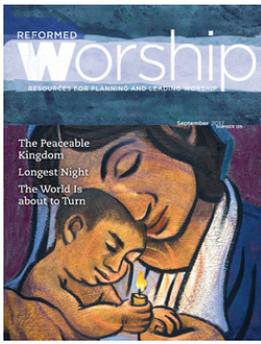
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