

MORE POWER IN THE PULPIT

How America's Most Effective
Black Preachers Prepare
Their Sermons

CLEOPHUS J. LARUE

Editor

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Walter S. Thomas Sr. has served as pastor of the New Psalmist Baptist Church in Baltimore, Maryland, since 1975. He received his Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Maryland in economics. He earned his Master of Divinity degree from the Howard University School of Religion in Washington, DC and a Doctor of Ministry degree from Saint Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore, Maryland. On January 31, 2005, twenty-eight ministerial sons and daughters met at the New Psalmist Baptist Church and voted unanimously to elect Bishop Thomas as president of the Kingdom Association of

Covenant Pastors as well as to the office of bishop. In July of 2005 Bishop Thomas was elevated to the office of bishop and presiding prelate of the Kingdom Association of Covenant Pastors. The Kingdom Association of Covenant Pastors is a newly established association consisting of men and women who have been influenced by the ministry of New Psalmist Baptist Church and Bishop Thomas. He is author of *Good Meat Makes Its Own Gravy* and *Spiritual Navigation for the 21st Century*. He is also editor of *Outstanding Black Sermons*, vol. 4.

Melvin V. Wade Sr. has served as the pastor of the Mount Moriah Baptist Church of Los Angeles, California, since 1975. He was born and raised in Memphis, Tennessee, and received a bachelor's degree from Bishop College in Dallas, Texas, and his Master of Arts degree and Doctor of Ministry degree from Faith Evangelical Seminary in Tacoma, Washington. Before coming to Mount Moriah, he held pastorates in Dallas and Houston, Texas. Wade is the former president of the National Missionary Baptist Convention of America. An accomplished singer and songwriter, Wade is coauthor of three books: *God Is Good All the Time*, *God Chose to Save Us*, and *These Three*.

Introduction

While a majority of contemporary ministers learn to preach through preaching manuals and informed reflection on homiletic texts, many black preachers continue to learn to preach primarily through imitation of the masters. That is, they learn to preach by observation, participation, and an eventual mastery of the “how-tos” of preaching from accomplished artisans of the preaching craft whom they have come to admire and respect.

Learning to preach through imitation of the masters does not imply a mere copying of the style of others. It does, however, suggest learning by means of closely observing and subsequently mastering the dynamics that come together to make black preaching a powerful communicative tool in the hands of a master craftsman. This preaching pedagogy is deeply embedded in the black religious psyche. In fact, it is so deeply woven into the fabric of black religious life that it becomes a part of the black sacred story—that story that lies so deeply within human consciousness that one is not always aware of just how forceful it is in shaping belief and behavior.

Consequently, the making of an effective black preacher begins not with formal studies but rather in the formative stages of the preacher’s life. It is there that the black church molds and shapes a preacher’s thought world in the richness and depth of the black religious experience. Owing to this reality, black preaching is not so much taught as it is caught. It is a way of being in the world that one develops over time

by immersing oneself in the culture and norms of black religious life. One does not learn how to become a black preacher; one learns how to become a preacher in the black religious experience.

Blacks who learn to preach by emulating those who are representative of the best of the tradition focus intently on nine fundamental characteristics that come to fore time and time again in this style of proclamation. These fundamentals include (1) the hermeneutic of an all-powerful God, (2) wrestling with Scripture, (3) a sense of divine encounter, (4) a waiting congregation, (5) cultural awareness, (6) a well-prepared manuscript, (7) a fitting sermon close, (8) an openness to unplanned additions, and (9) a powerful living voice.

THE HERMENEUTIC OF AN ALL-POWERFUL GOD

Effective black preaching concerns itself with the extraordinary experiences of a people and their God. It also concerns itself with a people's unique way of understanding the Bible and of applying those insights in very practical ways. When one considers the historical conditions under which blacks embraced Christianity, it is easy to see how their sociocultural experiences would have a profound effect on their understanding of who God is and how God works out God's meaning and purpose in their lives. A central truth blacks quickly came to embrace when they were allowed to read and interpret Scripture for themselves is that Scripture revealed a God of infinite power who could be trusted to act on their behalf. This direct relationship between black struggle and divine rescue colors the theological perceptions and themes of black preaching in a very decisive manner.

A God who is unquestionably for them is what blacks see when they go to the Scriptures. Thus a distinctive characteristic of black preaching is what blacks believe Scripture reveals about the sovereign God's involvement in the everyday affairs and circumstances of their existence. African Americans believe the sovereign God acts in very concrete and practical ways in matters pertaining to their survival, deliverance, advancement, prosperity, and overall well-being. This is the lens through which they interpret the Scriptures in preparation for preaching. The preacher who would preach with a certain sense of authority and accomplishment in the traditional black church must always remember that at its heart the black sermon is about God—

God's purposive acts in and for the world. The most effective preaching is preaching that conveys with clarity and insight how God acts in concrete situations in the lives of those who hear the gospel. This is not to suggest that every sermon ought to have the word *God* in it, but each sermon should concern itself with God's essence and actions—God's divine initiative and revelatory activity, especially as that activity is manifested through the work and person of Jesus Christ, biblically witnessed and historically confessed. This all-encompassing hermeneutic is at the core of traditional black preaching.

THE IMPORTANCE OF WRESTLING WITH THE TEXT

Black preaching exhibits a high regard for Scripture and has historically been noted for its strong biblical content. In many black churches, biblical preaching, defined as preaching that allows a text from the Bible to serve as the leading force in shaping the content and purpose of the sermon, is the type of preaching considered to be most faithful to traditional understandings of the proclaimed Word. Indeed, it is no secret that the Bible occupies a central place in the religious life of black Americans. More than a mere source for texts in black preaching, the Bible is the single most important source of language, imagery, and story for the sermon. Though biblical literacy in black churches is greatly diminished from earlier years, it has yet to reach the state where the Bible's primacy as a rich resource for black preaching is no longer the case.

Thus, black preaching is inextricably tied to Scripture. In the eyes of the black church a preacher without Scripture is like a doctor without a black bag. In other words, what one needs to get the preaching job done comes with some kind of encounter with Scripture. Any preacher who seeks to be heard on a regular basis in a black church must learn some method of engaging the scriptural text and drawing from that encounter some sense of the Word of God revealed *to* and acting *on* the present-day human situation of the black listeners. Effective preachers recognize that this daunting task of creatively engaging the Scriptures and pairing them with black lived experience is at the center of their weekly preparation. Therefore the preacher must be familiar with the Bible. The in-depth knowledge of Scripture required of the preacher cannot simply be a task-oriented familiarity with Scripture, for the

Bible does not fully yield its treasures as the Word of God to those who visit it from time to time when fishing for a sermon. One has to live with the Scriptures and walk up and down the streets of the texts in order to have those texts speak forth with power and conviction. Black preachers learn early on to seek this kind of engagement with the text.

A SENSE OF DIVINE ENCOUNTER

Blacks believe they encounter God throughout the sermon preparation process and most especially during the initial stages of sermon preparation. This encounter manifests itself in various ways. For some it involves sitting silent before God while for others it is a “tarrying” for the Spirit. Something comes from without and buoys the spirit and sparks the creativity of the preacher as he or she embarks on the sermon creation process. Many attribute this creative spark to something beyond their own subconscious mind-set. They refuse to advance the preparation process until they have some sense that a power from beyond them is at work in and through them. Without this in-breaking activity many feel that the sermon will focus too much on process and not enough on purpose.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WAITING CONGREGATION

The people for whom the sermon is being prepared are never far from the thoughts of black preachers at the time of preparation. In fact, many blacks speak of their need to maintain a constant focus on those who will hear the message. In a strange way, the preachers seem to anticipate the anticipation of the waiting congregation. Thus, every effort is made to say *for* them and *to* them what they (the congregation) would say if they had the chance. Participatory proclamation not only influences the rhythm and cadence of their delivery; it also affects the interaction of Scripture and context. Effective preaching can only happen when pulpit and pew are united in conversation with one another. Owing to the prominence of participatory proclamation blacks learn early on the importance of the symbiotic relationship between the pulpit and the pew. Preaching is always done in community even when the community is not physically present at the time of preparation.

AN ASTUTE AWARENESS OF THE CULTURE

There was a time in black religious life when some people believed that the truly “spiritual” preachers shut themselves away from the world and descended from the mountaintop of their studies on Sunday morning to deliver a word from on high. Today’s preachers warn against such aloofness and detachment from the world. They recognize the need to be in tune and in touch with the world around them. They sharpen their powers of observation by constantly seeking to name God’s presence in every aspect of human existence. There is no distinction between the sacred and the secular in black religious life. The most effective preachers are mindful of the happenings in their social, political, educational, and economic surroundings. Many argue, in fact, that such an awareness actually strengthens one’s preaching. The best of black preaching seriously engages the whole of God’s created order in its beauty and splendor, its disorder and unruliness. There are no areas of human existence where black preaching fears to tread. To this end, black preaching can strike the uninitiated ear as harsh, intrusive, and at times offensive. Yet preaching that takes every aspect of life seriously has the greatest appeal among a large number of the black church-going public.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A MANUSCRIPT

While many black preachers do not carry a manuscript into the pulpit, most will tell you that to preach without a manuscript does not mean one is preaching unprepared. In times past it was believed that a manuscript preacher was an intellectual preacher, and conversely, that a preacher without a manuscript was a spiritual preacher. Such distinctions are quickly fading. While preaching without a manuscript gives the impression of immediacy, spontaneity, and anointing by the Holy Spirit, it is becoming more acceptable in black preaching to prepare a manuscript even if one does not intend to preach from it in the pulpit.

Writing the sermon out helps to bring focus and clarity to the sermon, prevents one from rambling, and firms up language written for the ear. A tightly worded manuscript, where each phrase has been carefully considered, helps the preacher to paint the mental picture more effectively. Moreover, a manuscript allows the preacher to get comfortable with the flow and contours of the sermon and thus serves to

strengthen the rhythm and cadence of the oral delivery. To have the language of the sermon set down in writing and thus clearly set down in one's mind sharpens the oratorical thrust and limits unintended pauses and dead air in the preaching event.

Those who do choose to use a manuscript in the pulpit do so with great effect because the oral nature of the event is never far from their minds even when reading from a prepared text. In black preaching the style of delivery determines, in large part, the success of the oral performer. Blacks learn early on to steer clear of lackadaisical deliveries. Verbal essays that sound like a lecture in the pulpit are a no-no in many black churches. The oral delivery must be dynamic and invigorating. Spontaneity that allows for improvisation and digression even when using a manuscript is not only acceptable; in black preaching it's expected.

A FITTING CLOSE

One must learn the importance of closing the sermon in a proper manner. For some the sermon should always end in a joyful celebration while for others the most important thing is that the sermon end in a manner that is logically consistent with the controlling thought. On some occasions the close should cause one to reflect on faith and life. At other times it should move one to repent and to think more deeply on the mercies of God. The close might also call us to some specific action in the larger world in service to others, and sometimes it should simply issue forth in ceaseless praise to the wonders of a God who is for us. The closing of the sermon should not be a disjointed distraction or some tacked-on ornamental rhetorical flourish intended to whip the congregation into a fevered pitch. Rather, it should send the listeners away with a clear sense of what the preacher was attempting to convey throughout the entire message.

THE SERMON AS CONTINUOUS CREATION

In black preaching circles sermons are never fully completed. There is always more that could be said and will be said, since blacks have no qualms about preaching the same sermon again. The sermon is never a finished product. After the sermon has been prepared and readied for Sunday service, different ideas and new ways of thinking about it con-

tinue to come. Even while one is preaching the sermons, new thoughts and ideas come pouring out and thus become unexpected additions to the sermon. Many preachers edit their sermons soon after they have been preached in order to take advantage of fresh insights that come to them during its delivery or immediately thereafter. For some, the unplanned additions turn out to be some of the more creative parts of the sermon.

THE POWER OF THE LIVING VOICE

In black preaching the sermon from beginning to end is viewed as an oral/aural exercise. It is to be spoken and heard. The sermon manuscript is never regarded as an end in itself. What is written is but an “arrested performance” lying dormant on the page that can only be brought to life through the skillful articulation and mastery of the preacher’s *viva vox* (living voice).

People who come from cultures with a high oral residue consider the spoken word to have great power. All oral utterance that comes from inside living organisms is “dynamic.” Many black preachers rely on the power of the living voice to bring full expression to what they hope to accomplish in the preaching event. Blacks know intuitively that there has to be a certain energy and conviction to the spoken word when proclaiming the gospel. Ultimately, their ability to evoke, empower, challenge, and change comes not through that which they have written but through the spoken word—through articulated sound. An awareness of the oral nature of the finished product is a key component in the composition of the sermon. The performative component in black preaching is seldom frowned on by other blacks because of the importance they attach to articulated sound.

While one could argue that these nine basics and many more could best be taught in the formal classroom setting, in black preaching these observable phenomena continue to be passed from generation to generation through imitation of the masters.

This book reflects the continuing interest on the part of those who continue to learn to preach in this manner. It is offered as *More Power in the Pulpit* as a sequel to the highly successful first volume *Power in the Pulpit: How America’s Most Effective Preachers Prepare Their Sermons*. The preachers in this volume come from diverse backgrounds, but they represent some of the finest preaching in contemporary black religion.

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*The Presence and Power
of Christian Preaching*

WILLETTE ALYCE BURGIE-BRYANT

I believe that Christian preaching is ideally a manifestation of God's own Presence, with power to have temporal impact from an eternal point of origin—that origin being the Word. If I had to craft a definition of Christian preaching, I would say that it is God's Word to a people in a particular moment, rooted and grounded in Scripture, directed by the Holy Spirit, transmitted through the personality of the preacher, proclaiming the love, grace, glory, power, work, care, purposes, and invitation of God in Jesus Christ.

Preaching is so potent and mysterious a phenomenon that my cumbersome definition hardly begins to capture what Christian preaching is and what it seeks to accomplish. The preached Word is something beyond the words of the preacher, since the preacher cannot control what listeners are hearing. As a preaching professor told me when I was in seminary, "You can control the *message*, the words that go forth, but you cannot control the *meaning* that develops in the minds of your listeners." Each listener's ear takes the message and translates it into that listener's life language, and God is in the midst of the listener's translation process. As a singularly compelling and dynamic preacher once advised me, "In the preaching moment, do not concentrate on the congregation; focus your attention on God. That is your job. If you do *your* job, God will see to it that the congregation gets what He knows they need."

All this has led me to conclude that preaching is a marvelously complex Word meeting between God and us, a meeting where things *happen* to God's glory, to the Kingdom's advance, and to our edification.

A dear brother in ministry once suggested helpful metaphors for the way creative sermon-preparation energy flows through two different types of temperaments: there are "Sergeants," and there are "Surfers." Sergeants are those to whom it seems natural (even if not easy) to abide by a regular, preplanned routine of prayer, study, and productivity. As the military title suggests, Sergeants are generally regimented in the way they live their lives. For example, Sergeants may be prone to having their devotional time at the same time each day; they may do a predetermined type or quantity of reading each week or month; and they may determine to execute the various preparatory tasks of their ministry on a predictable time table. Surfers, on the other hand, need the "tide" to come in for them to function at their fullest potential. Just like beachcombers do not legislate the tempo of the waves, Surfers' best work is fueled by a rhythmic rush of Spirit and creativity over which they have no control. When the tide rushes in, a Surfer is prolific and indefatigable, often accomplishing in days what a Sergeant might take weeks to hammer out. Oh, but when the tide is out, a Surfer is challenged, if not bereft: spiritual, intellectual, physical, and emotional energies hover at bare subsistence levels. During low tide, a Surfer is sustained only by the tidal pools and puddles of inspiration and learning left over from previous big waves.

Both of these temperaments require discipline and faith in order to function well. Sergeants must keep plodding on in the absence of the energizing power of periodic peaks of excitement, while Surfers must apply themselves to maintain basic functionality between tides. Even during seasons when the ministry vineyard or the soil of the heart seem to lie fallow, Sergeants must keep faith that the disciplined dailyness of their efforts will bear fruit in time. And Surfers, in the lackluster, frustrating, and even frightening times between waves, must trust that God will send the tides at the right times, over and over again, so that life and ministry will be fulfilled according to God's purposes.

On hearing the description of these two types, I instantly recognized myself as a Surfer. And I was enormously relieved because, up until that point, I had only heard of the Sergeant model and had been burdened all my life by the delusion that I was supposed to contort myself to function as a Sergeant. Now, I had the liberating sense that my task was not to be someone/someway else, but rather to be as faithful to God as possible in the context of how God had wired me as a Surfer.

As a Surfer, my devotional life has something of a seasonal quality to it. There are seasons when I am virtually obsessed with poring over Scripture, gleefully immersed in it, probing texts and reveling in the connections between texts and themes and concepts in the Bible. When I have reached a point of saturation, such a season may give way to a season of intense intercessory prayer, or it may transition into a season of ongoing, spontaneous worship throughout my days. Alternatively, I may find myself in a season of craving massive quantities of solitude so I can brood over the interior stock God has poured into me in recent seasons while I grope for insight and reach for deliverance. Another sort of season is one in which I find myself observing the world, reading voraciously, exploring a variety of areas of discourse. These and other seasons, each marked by the intensity of its own particular spiritual and intellectual appetite, come and go like tides in my life. The two constants, I must say, undergirding all these seasons, are the Bible (read or remembered), and prayer without ceasing. The transitions between seasons are a bit disconcerting, as I find myself in between one tide and the next, unable to focus on anything in particular and finding it difficult to be productive. At these times, indeed, I walk by faith in the One who loved me and gave Himself for me. It has been gratifying and calming to learn that God lets none of these seasons go to waste in my preaching life, each season in its own way making invaluable contributions to the sermons He subsequently sends to me and through me.

Perhaps because I am a Surfer, I have found that I do not approach sermon preparation the same way on a consistent basis. That is not to say that there are not some consistent practices that are important to my sermon development process; it is just that my *approach* is not predictable. Sermons are “conceived” in a variety of ways, and sermon “seeds” burst into my spirit and consciousness and lay claim to me from a variety of directions. The direction from which a sermon comes often determines, then, my starting point and approach. For example, sometimes while I am studying or meditating on Scripture, a fact, phrase, word, or image will arrest me. Occasionally a sermon will be conceived as I ruminate or pray over a particular problem—my own, someone else’s, or a community’s—and the Holy Spirit draws my attention to a biblical text that speaks, perhaps unexpectedly, to the dilemma of how to most faithfully face the difficulty at hand. Sometimes a biblical text will illuminate the spiritual or conceptual connections between events, relationships, or circumstances that until then had seemed unrelated. And then there are the times when some gracious soul invites me to

preach for a particular occasion or on a particular theme, and I begin then to query the Spirit of God as to what He would want proclaimed in that place on that day to those people. These are just some of the ways the seed of a sermon emerges or is planted in my consciousness and begins to swirl around in my soul like a growing fireball.

After a sermon is conceived, there begins a completely delightful journey of sermonic exploration and organization, as I work with the Holy Spirit to have the sermon grow and take on some particular shape. I have found that several disciplines have consistently served in the development of my sermons: prayer, meditation, exegesis, research, imagination, and vulnerability. The way the sermon seed is planted in my spirit seems to dictate to some extent the order in which these disciplines are engaged in a particular sermon's development.

For example, if the sermon seed is planted by way of my being arrested by something in a biblical text, then I am first most inclined to "sit with" the text, prayerfully meditating on it to discern what insight, revelation, healing, comfort, or correction is clamoring to make itself known from inside the text. It is as if the text were very much alive, "living and active," breathing and compelling me to crack it open to find what it wants to show me. God is calling me, personally and directly, through the text, bidding me to lean my ear, my heart, and my life closer to hear what Divine utterance He would grant.

As a way of entering into the possibilities embedded in the biblical text, during this prayerful meditative phase I may use my "sanctified imagination" to construct a version of the feelings, motivations, needs, and impulses of the persons and groups in the text. This helps me begin to grasp some of the ways in which the text connects with universal human experience via particular circumstances. Cultivating some insight into human nature, through my own experiences and through the study of disciplines like psychology, sociology, history, and other social sciences, is very helpful in surmising a plausible picture of the unspoken, unwritten dynamics and impulses that permeate and surround every biblical scenario.

In preparing to preach, I try to exercise an intentional attitude of vulnerability to the text in my own life, allowing its encouragement or censure, its deliverance or discipline, to begin to work on me. To be sure, I am convinced that if we preach only what we have attained, then surely we are poor preachers, and that of a god no higher than we ourselves. Nevertheless, I consider submissive vulnerability before the biblical text to be essential for the humble proclamation of the Word of God. In lis-

tening to other preachers, I have found that such submission to the text injects an authentic personal energy into the proclamation of the Word, and further ensures the authenticity of the preacher in the preaching of it. Preachers need not speak specifically about themselves in sermons, but if sermons are preached *after* the preacher has submitted to being critiqued by the text, the preacher can proclaim with personal authority that the Word is true, lending an “Amen” to the authority and power that the Word has on its own. I have found, sometimes to my chagrin, that my Lord often wants to send a Word *to* me before He sends it *through* me. Of course, there are times when the Word really is sent through a preacher without necessarily being intended to speak specifically to the preacher; but I am persuaded that it is a good thing to keep the ego in check by attempting to hear what the Word is saying to *me* before I preach it to someone else.

Exegesis is the biblical inquirer’s version of a treasure hunt. The meaning of one of Jesus’ parables can be completely transformed by knowledge of some peculiarity of first-century Jewish culture, and the significance of some biblical character’s words or actions might be hidden in plain sight until one understands more details of the historical context. Further interpretive vistas are opened when one does studies of key words in the Greek or Hebrew text—it is astonishing how much English translations obscure even while they communicate the Word of God to us.

In my view, an exegetical reading of the biblical text (which is a relatively modern phenomenon) must go hand in hand with a meditative reading of the text (which is how the Bible was read and understood for centuries before the Enlightenment). Not that both readings must say the same thing. Because it is sacred Scripture and because it is *text*, it goes without saying that there are any number of ways to read, hear, and interpret a particular pericope. But if the exegetical reading and the meditative reading turn out to be in conflict, it is then time for me to bear down in prayer, to find the deeper point of insight and understanding my Lord is trying to guide me to. I have once in a while been forced to abandon what I thought were some very comely and preachable phrases and rhymes when I discovered that a point I intended to make in a sermon was exegetically untenable.

There have been times when I have preached a sermon series. These sermon series were a boon to me as a Surfer, especially when the “tide” was out, because the series allowed me to sustain attention and momentum with the series itself serving as the “wave” I rode to the sermonic

shore. Furthermore, there are few things more fascinating than what God will reveal when we return repeatedly to a text or a theme, asking again and again, “What else is there, Lord? What else will You show me?” The Bible is an endless depth, and preaching a series is a thrilling way to progressively plumb those depths in one specific area.

Where is the listening congregation in all of this? When invited by a pastor to preach to a congregation, I often ask about the nature of the occasion and its theme, the demographics of the congregation and the neighborhood, whether the pastor currently has any ongoing issues or concerns that are being addressed in the congregation, and other such background questions. Having access to these types of information enables me to be sensitive and informed as I try to discern what the Lord is communicating to me for the congregation’s benefit.

After having been an itinerant preacher for many years, I found that preaching as a pastor is quite different from “guest preacher” preaching. For the four years that I pastored, I had a peculiar role in my listeners’ lives as their undershepherd, and our relationship was a far more intimate one than can be cultivated on an Annual Day. As the Spirit led me to see the relevance of the Word to the intricate details of my people’s lives, Scripture would come alive to me even more, and I did my best to pass that life on to my congregation during the preaching moment each week, as well as during Bible Study time. The context in which we worshiped together—in a house—also affected the shape of my sermons during that period. My house-church sermons often had a more conversational tone, as it was fitting in such a small space to have more of a dialogue together in the Word, along with the traditional “call and response.” By preaching from both pulpits and armchairs, I have learned that there is a special energy and ambiance that can be obtained when saints gather in a space built and set apart for the worship of God, and another special kind of energy that emerges in a home setting, where Jesus Himself also did quite a bit of preaching. I have found that the worship setting does indeed affect the shape and rhythm of the sermons I preach, and I have seen God save and nourish souls through it all.

Birthing a sermon, like birthing a child, is sometimes painful. In the early stages of sermon preparation, I deeply enjoy the pleasure of savoring the biblical insights that simmer in my head while Gospel passion percolates in my soul. But it is often difficult for me to transition from these delights to the labor of choosing finite words and phrases to put on paper. As a manuscript preacher, I must repeatedly overcome the temptation to procrastinate at this point in the process. Delays at this

phase are costly because every delay shortcuts the ripening of the sermon on paper that happens during the first, second, third, and subsequent revisions of the manuscript. This reality of sermonic ripening renders the preaching moment something of a still photo of a sermon that has, in effect, become a living organism, capable of growth and development, seemingly *ad infinitum*.

Though I usually birth sermons into manuscript, once in a rare while a sermon will alternatively come to me as an outline and then stubbornly refuse to flower into a manuscript, insisting on being preached from the outline. Still more rarely a sermon will drop almost full-blown into my spirit. Whatever a sermon's "final" form prior to the preaching moment, it is important to me that I take the time to become thoroughly familiar with it. Ideally, familiarity combined with a very large (16-point) typeface ensure that I will be far more engaged with God and the congregation than I am with the paper in front of me when it comes time to stand at the sacred desk.

Once a sermon is born and revised, there is nothing else here on earth to compare with the joy of proclaiming and manifesting the Presence of God to His people in the preaching moment. As terrifying as it is to stand in service of such an awesome God, it is also most life-affirming to experience God, in spite of my flawed and surfing self, condescending to use me in His work to save, comfort, correct, heal, encourage, and deliver His people. I am grateful for the privilege, and my life is sustained by the grace of it.

Sermon: “You Are on God’s Mind”

WILLETTE ALYCE BURGIE-BRYANT

God sits high. But God is not sitting high and just watching the clouds go by. God sits high and is lifted up above every name that can be named for a reason. God sits high and lifted up above every principality and every power, above everything in all creation for a purpose. God sits high and lifted up above every demon and every destruction, above every disease and every distress; God sits high and lifted up above every imaginable sin and every affliction, for a meaningful purpose, and that purpose is so that God can rule and reign. God sits high because God is sovereign; God sits high and lifted up because *only* God is God, and beside God there is no other God. God sits up high, exalted in the heavens, swaddled in glory! God sits high—and God looks low.

God looks low because God is busy. God looks low . . . to make sure there’s enough seed to be found when it’s feeding time for the birds of the air. God looks low . . . to take notice every time a sparrow falls from the sky. God looks low . . . to design high-end fashions for the lilies of the fields, and for the roses in your front yard. God looks low . . . to count the hairs on your head, and my head. God looks low . . . to prepare answers to our prayers before we even recognize the need to pray. God looks low . . . to search us, and to know us; to see our lying down and our rising up; to get acquainted with all of our won-

derful and nasty ways. God looks low . . . to see just which of the riches in glory in Christ Jesus each of us will need from moment to moment to moment, each and every day. God looks low . . . to wield the two-edged sword of God's Word, a sword so sharp it could split the bone from the marrow, so sharp it can dissect the intentions of the heart, a Word so sharp it can separate the need from the want, the real from the illusion, the foolishness from the faith. God wields a sword so sharp it can separate the sinner from the sin. Yes, God looks low . . . and sometimes, to catch a glimpse of us in all our low-down-ness, God has to look *really* low. But thanks be to God—God looks low, anyhow.

God sits high and looks low: God sits high enough to be in charge, and God looks low enough to make a difference. But why?

Why should God bother to extend Himself across the span of the distance between East and West? Why should God condescend to fill the void between North and South? Why should God reach out His arms of mercy and stretch them out till one hand touches heaven and the other touches hell. Why should God simultaneously sit high and look low?

God sits so high and looks so low because *you* . . . are on God's mind.

You are on God's mind. You are on God's mind. . . .

Listen to a story: The people of Israel had been overwhelmed by a foreign, hostile power. They were dragged away from the safe and the familiar; they were taken away from their homes and separated from their sense of independence. They weren't sure if their exile was more of a punishment for their disobedience to God or a test of their faithfulness and their willingness to trust God through adversity; it may have been a little bit of both. They found themselves in a condition that is not at all uncommon: they were under pressure—defeated, even—by an adversary. The Israelites were in a situation where there were no easy answers, they were in a place in life where God's intentions were not as plain and as clear as we might wish they were. We've all been there. They were in exile. You and I have been in exile too. Yes, we have.

When your heart is so broken that your chest feels like it's caved in and no one understands, that's a kind of exile: an exile from connection, an exile from comfort. We've been there.

When everything is going wrong and you have no power to make it right, that's exile. When somebody else is calling the shots and the shots are shooting you, that's exile. When you're cast out of your safety zone in life and have to find your way through hostile foreign fields, that's exile. Exile—we've been there. Exile is disconcerting, disturbing, and bewildering. We've been there, just like the Israelites. They were bewildered in their exile: not sure how to read the writing on the wall, not sure how to interpret what was going on, not sure what it was that God was up to. Exile.

Though He did not tell them His heart immediately, God did not remain silent in the face of the Israelites' bewilderment. Though He bided His time and chose His moment, and they had to wait for His Word, God did not tarry endlessly speechless while the Israelites languished in exile. No, in the midst of their predicament, through the prophet Jeremiah, at the right time, God told the exiled people of Israel, "I know the plans I have for you" (Jer. 29:11). The Hebrew word *hasab* is translated here as "to have a plan." *Hasab* is a word that is rich in meaning. This word tells us that God is *scheming* and *planning*, *plotting* and *contriving*, *counting* and *measuring*, skillfully and artfully *reckoning*, even now, for you. God's mind is busy devising *strategies*, for you. It means that God is *thinking*, and thinking hard, about you. God's mind has *purposes in its working*, for you.

"I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD to the exiles. "Plans to *prosper* you, and not to harm you" (Jer. 29:11 NIV). Now, in this context, the word "prosper" does *not* mean "make you financially rich." The word here translated as "prosper" is the Hebrew word *shalom*, and the word *shalom* is so abundant in meaning that it boggles the imagination.

Shalom here means that, if you would just get God on your mind, God has plans to give you *peace* and to make you *peaceful*. *Shalom* means that if you would just get God on your mind, God has plans to make you *dwell in safety*. *Shalom* means that if you would just get God on your mind, God has plans to situate you in *good health* of mind, of body, and of spirit. *Shalom* here means that if you would just get God on your mind, God has you on *His* mind, with plans to situate you in *whole and healthy relationships*. *Shalom* here means that if you would just get God on your mind, God has plans to heal and build up your *community*.

Shalom here means that if you would just get God on your mind, God has you on *His* mind, with plans to crown your Godly efforts with *divine approval*. Shalom here means that God has you on His mind to bring you out of exile, out of exile and into a state of fulfilled *well-being* in every dimension of your existence. You are on God’s mind, and God has plans to *shalom* you, not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I . . . will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you. (Jer. 29:12–14 NIV).

Yes, you *are* on God’s mind.

Yes, you. You, brokenhearted one. You’ve been exiled to a dark night, a dark night of despair. A night so dark that your eyes feel blinded and the darkness itself feels thick. The darkness of your despair is so chill it makes you shiver, so heavy it makes you stagger; the dark of despair is so sharp it cuts your heart; it’s so deep you feel like you’re drowning. You’re in exile in a land of despair, but I came by to tell you that *you* are on God’s mind, and He has plans to bring you back from your exile. You *are* on God’s mind.

And so are you. You, weary one, you, tired of trying. You’ve been dragged away, an exile, to a state of frustration. You tried and you tried, but your situation refuses to yield. You worked and labored, prayed and believed, trusted and hung on, but now you find yourself perched on the edge of a precipice that overhangs unbelief. God did not come when you wanted God to, and it’s gone on so long that you’re beginning to believe that maybe just this *one* time, God just might be running late. Well, let me tell you about a woman named Sarah and a man named Abraham; let me tell you what waiting on God and trusting in God’s plans for you can do.

Sarah and Abraham wanted very much to have a child of their own, and they received a word from the Lord promising them that they would. But a long time passed—*years*—without any sign that God was going to follow through on His promise. Abraham and Sarah began to wonder if they were supposed to help God out somehow, or if they had misunderstood God’s

intentions. To make a really long story short, they did finally conceive a child between them, and it was a son, and they called him Isaac.

Needless to say, Isaac was the apple of his parents' eyes. Well, one day when Isaac was in his early teens, God told Abraham to take Isaac up to a mountain and sacrifice his son, his only son, his promised and long awaited and much-cherished son. God told Abraham to sacrifice his son to God.

Abraham wasted no time. He saddled up a donkey for the trip. He cut and brought wood for the burnt sacrifice. Abraham, Isaac, and two servants journeyed for three whole days until they could see God's chosen site of sacrifice off in the distance. At that point the man and his son left the donkey and the servants, and Abraham said, "We will go on ahead and worship." As they moved forward, Isaac noticed that something was amiss, something was wrong: "But daddy!! The flint for the fire is here, and the wood is here, but *where is the lamb for the burnt offering??*"

Abraham had to answer his son. And so Abraham, the faithful one, replied as all the faithful have learned to respond ever since. In times of want and times of scarcity, in times of short-handedness and short-moneyedness, in times of depletion and exhaustion, in times when visions fail and steps falter, Abraham's offspring in the faith have learned to answer just as Abraham answered. Abraham knew enough about God to be able to say, "God Himself will provide the lamb for the sacrifice."

God is willing to provide for you. God is glad to provide for you. God is wise enough to provide for you. And God is able to provide for you. But in order to be in the right place at the right time to receive your provision when it arrives, you have to get yourself situated in accordance with God's instructions. Watch Abraham:

After leaving the servants and the donkey, Abraham took Isaac and headed out to the place that *God had told him* to go to. And when he got to the place *God had told him* to go to, Abraham built an altar, *just as God had instructed*. Then, Abraham laid out the wood on the altar, *just like he was supposed to*. And then, in ultimate obedience to God, Abraham laid out his son, his precious son, his promised son, his long-awaited son, his only son, his beloved son. Abraham laid out his son on the altar of sacri-

face, *just like God had told him to*. Abraham was positioned for blessing because he was faith filled and wise enough to follow God's instructions. And Abraham raised the knife to slay his precious, beloved, only son, to follow through on God's instructions and make good on his obedience. And just as he was about to plunge that knife into his son's pounding heart, Abraham was distracted by a noise. It was the sound of something rustling, rattling, struggling in the bushes. Because, you see, Abraham and Isaac were on God's mind, just as you are.

This is how God works. While Abraham and Isaac were making their way up one side of the mountain, God had another journey being made up the *other* side of the mountain. While Abraham and Isaac were making their faithful and torturous climb, a ram was making a journey to the mountaintop too. And this ram's journey up the mountain wasn't a trip God threw together at the last minute.

In order to be fit for sacrifice, in order to be ritually clean and acceptable, that ram had to be utterly unscarred and completely uninjured. To be fit for God's plan, that ram had to be preserved from the countless natural hazards in the life of a wild he-goat. God Himself had to stand vigil and keep that ram safe. God had to keep that ram safe from childhood injuries while it frolicked carelessly on the rugged mountainside. God had to keep that ram unscarred through the head-butting fights for male dominance that would punctuate the ram's adolescence. God had to keep that ram from even incidental injuries on the uneven and rocky Middle-Eastern mountain terrain. So God preserved that ram through a lifetime of dangers, toils, and snares to bring him, without spot or injury, to the top of the very mountain where, unbeknownst to the ram, he had an appointment with Abraham and Isaac!

But that's not all: God had to spend some time strategizing on this thing! Let's go even further back in time. *Centuries* before Abraham and Isaac were ever born, God sent storms of wind and sand and rain onto that mountain of sacrifice; sent storms fierce enough to wear down rocks; sent storms in just the right direction and just the right frequency to pummel the rocks in just the right place on that mountain so that in one particular growing season, there would be just enough soil in a rocky cleft to allow some seeds to take root and grow strong. So, after centuries of

preparing the soil in that specific place, God caused some seeds to take root near the spot that God had chosen for the commanded sacrifice.

And these could not be just any old kind of seeds! They couldn't be thorn bush seeds, or the ram would get scratched. They couldn't be gentle flowering plant seeds, or the ram wouldn't get caught. God knew that He had to dispatch seeds for a kind of bush that would grow up big, and bushy and tangled, tangled enough and big enough to hang on to the horns of a spotless ram!! You hear me? God had to set some stuff in motion way ahead of time; God got some stuff laid out just right, so at the precise moment when Abraham was about to slay his only son, a spotless ram would find itself wrestling with a bush not too far off, calling attention to itself, making itself known and available as an alternative and acceptable sacrifice! You *are* on God's mind!!!

You there! Yes, *you!* You, Sinner! You are on God's mind! You may feel like you've been taken away captive into a life of sin. Sin has taken away your mind and made you an exile from righteousness, because the way you have been thinking and talking and treating people, righteousness has felt ashamed to count you among her children. You've been rolling around in selfishness, and your greed for comfort and pleasure has you desecrating yourself, debasing the sacredness of other people, and disregarding the sanctity of God's creation. You've been trying to keep God in a cage, and maybe you let God out for two hours on Sunday—or maybe you have been trying to banish God's Presence from your life and push *all* thoughts of God out of your mind. Sin has made you lose your right mind, and if sin had its druthers, it would also make you lose both this life and the next! But you know what?

Even though God may be the last thing on *your* mind, from the foundation of the world, your sorry soul was the *first* thing on God's mind, and you've been on God's mind ever since! So you need to follow God's instructions and get yourself situated into a faith relationship with Christ Jesus, because while we were yet sinners, climbing up a mountain of unbelief, Christ Jesus was climbing up the other side of a hill called Calvary. And when He reached the top of Calvary, He got tangled up and crucified on a cross to pay the cost to bring us back from an exile

of eternal death! Jesus got caught up on the cross of redemption because God Himself had committed Himself to providing a lamb without spot or wrinkle to be sacrificed for our sin. On that Friday the Lamb of God died on that cross, and was buried in a borrowed tomb, but because you were on God's mind, and I was on God's mind, early Sunday morning that Lamb was raised *up* from the dead, with all power in His hand!

Be not dismayed, whate'er betide—you are on God's mind!
Beneath God's wings of love abide—you are on God's mind!
Through days of toil when heart doth fail—you are on God's mind!
When dangers fierce your path assail—you are on God's mind!
No matter what may be the test—you are on God's mind!
Lay, weary one, upon God's breast—because God knows!
God knows! God knows the plans that God has for *you*!
Because *you* . . . are on God's mind. God *will* take care of you!
Through every day! God will!! Over *all* the way! God will!! God *will* take care of you! God will take care of you. Because *you*. . . are on God's mind.