

## Exercises for Attending

Start with a biblical text.

### 1. Write it

By hand. In a journal—preferably one that is bigger than the standard 8½ x 11-inch page, and definitely one that is unlined. We all need help getting out of the box and off the computer screen. As you write out the text, notice how you are forced to slow down and really *see* it, *notice* it, *hear* it. If something grabs your attention, make a note to follow up on it.

### 2. Pocket it

Now write out another copy of the Scripture on a small piece of paper, small enough to fold and fit in your pocket. Get in the habit of carrying it around with you. You are going to be looking at it a lot. For example . . .

### 3. Memorize it

My students always balk at first when I tell them we are going to memorize our Scripture texts—but that's before they try it and become converts to the practice. The first rule is never to sit down at a desk and tell yourself, "Now, I will memorize." This is work that happens best when you are doing other things, mundane things, preferably with your hands. So take that Scripture text out of your pocket as you go about your weekly chores. Take it out when you're folding laundry, doing dishes, taking a walk, rocking a baby. Say the text aloud, over and over, until you've memorized it. Now live with it. (*Note:* Remember, you don't have to read the text as a memorized piece in worship. You aren't doing this for anyone but you, the preacher; you don't even have to advertise that you are doing it! The point is just to make sure that you turn your Scripture into the toddler that follows you around everywhere you go and never leaves you alone for even a single moment.)

### 4. Underline it

Read the text you've written out in your journal. Without stopping to edit yourself, underline/circle/mark words and phrases that stand out to

you. Now look at the words or phrases you've underlined and write them out separately. Spend some time pondering and praying about those words. What do they suggest to you? What questions are you asking? Translate the underlined words into Greek or Hebrew. Keep asking, "Where are these words leading me?"

### 5. "Soccer Mom" it

I call this practice "soccer Mom-ing the text" because I *am* a soccer Mom (and a lacrosse Mom and a basketball Mom); it's how I spend a lot of time. So I have learned to read texts where I already am. If you aren't a soccer Mom yourself, think about where you do spend your time (the library, the coffee shop, the office, the carpool) and begin pulling your text out of your pocket as you frequent those places. Invite friends (strangers, if you're brave) to sit down and read the text with you. If they feel unqualified (you know, because you're the expert; you're a *preacher*), tell them you aren't trying to solve the text, you're just trying to hear it through many other ears. You'll be amazed at what they *do* hear.

### 6. Dislocate it

Take your text someplace that you wouldn't ordinarily go, someplace where you feel "dislocated"—either because of who you are (among others who are different from you) or because of what you are doing (reading Scripture in a place where such a thing isn't ordinarily done). It's important that the dislocation makes you feel odd, marginalized, or even nervous. Dislocate your self/body, and read the text from your journal (out loud, if you dare!). Now pay attention. How does the text look and sound different in this location? What do you notice that you might have missed before?

### 7. Subtext it

Subtext is nonverbal communication, and we all do it, all the time. Subtext is what we are *thinking* when we actually speak words out loud. (Example: to the question, "How are you, honey?" try saying the words, "Fine," while *thinking*, "I am having a miserable day," "I just aced that test!" and "Sometimes you make me so mad I could just spit.") One of the simplest and most evocative interpretive practices for

a Scripture text is to play around with subtexts. Don't let yourself dwell on what the characters or narrators were *really* thinking when they said or wrote those words (who knows, anyway?!). Ask yourself what is possible. Then try some subtexts that actually sound *impossible*—and prepare to be surprised. This is fun to do with a group and hilarious to do with youth. It also might make an interesting change for lectionary groups; preachers could write various subtexts to try or take turns directing one another. The results are always rich.

### 8. Block it

“Blocking” is a theater phrase used to describe the physical movement and placement of actors in a scene: where they stand, when they are to cross downstage, when they are to drink from a glass, whether they say a line kneeling or lying down, and so on. Block your Scripture scene, first in your mind, then on paper in your journal, then (best of all) with some agreeable volunteers. Look at the physical movements of the characters; notice where they are in relation to one another. Are they facing each other? Is there eye contact? What does their physical placement communicate about their status, their feelings, and so forth? Again, this is good to do with a group of interpreters.

### 9. Body it

Some of us are kinesthetic learners: we learn best when we throw our whole bodies into a text. If you are this kind of person, try “bodying” the text by moving, dancing, gesturing, or whatever else comes to mind as you say or hear the words. You might try signing it (American Sign Language, or ASL, used in the deaf and hearing-impaired communities, is a beautiful language to embody and to see), or working with a group of children to come up with suitable gestures that tell the story (children have very few inhibitions about bodying). If the thought of bodying the text gives you hives, save it for a group exercise when you feel braver.

### 10. Push it

Try the ancient rabbinical practice of *havruta*, which gives you a way to explore the limits of interpretation. You need a partner for this. Sit down facing one another, each with a copy of the text in front of you.

Take turns reading the text aloud, while your partner listens. Then take turns reacting to the text: what do you each see and hear in it? Now get extreme: push your ideas and images as far as they will go, even to the point of the absurd or heretical, just to see what happens. If the listening partner feels the speaking partner has gone too far, s/he should communicate it calmly and nonjudgmentally. The point of this exercise is to find the limits of the text by crossing them, secure in the knowledge that your partner won't leave you stranded. Spend fifteen minutes engaging in *havruta*, then stop and reflect. Did the exercise give you freedom to push the boundaries of the text? Where are the limits of interpretation for you, now?

### 11. "Other" it

If you're a woman, read your text with a man. If you're a man, read it with a woman. Ask the other person to reflect particularly from the perspective of their gender (which you don't share). What do you each see differently? Talk about it. Now "other" the text for different races, ages, sexual orientations, nationalities, income levels, religions, or anything you can think of.

### 12. Counter it

Every text is a response to other texts, somewhere, in Scripture; they work together, talk to one another, agree with one another, challenge one another. What texts is *your* text responding to? Which texts do you imagine it might be countering? Another way to go at this is to ask what the countertestimony of your text might be and how that countertestimony keeps your text from becoming an idol.

### 13. Create it

Take your journal to a quiet place outside. Bring paints, pastels, charcoal, crayons, pencils, fountain pens, magic markers, or whatever else makes you feel like an artist. (You might bring one medium you know and one you've never tried before.) Read your text aloud several times. Draw whatever comes to mind, giving yourself time limits of two, five, ten, or fifteen minutes (to keep you from staring at the paper all afternoon). You can do one drawing or several. This works especially well

with a group, since others often see things in our own art that we are blind to ourselves.

#### 14. Study it

Yes, it *is* important to remember the world of scholarship! But now that you've had time to really *live* with the text, how do you hear the words of our biblical and theological colleagues? What insights seem especially truthful to you? What subtexts do you hear in *their* words? How might you continue this dialogue with them in the body of the sermon?

### But How Long Will It Take?

My students sometimes ask me this, and the answer (naturally) is that I don't know. I suggest they try three exercises, one of which pushes them a little further in the direction of the foolish and undignified than they might ordinarily go and see what happens. The point is to get in the habit of stretching ourselves. Over time, we learn which exercises stretch us most efficiently and consistently, and we incorporate them into our routine; we make a habit of them. From there, we have to trust that by leaning into them, practicing them over and over, we will recognize the Word when it comes.

## II. DESCRIBING: WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

The second move toward the sermon for a testimony preacher is the practice of *describing*, or finding words to express what we have seen in our attending. Describing asks us to narrate what we have seen and then to take it a step further toward the act of confession (Who did Mary Magdalene see? She saw *the Lord!*). It reminds us that we are *Christian* witnesses: we see what we see through a particular lens, which is a lens of faith. We will also speak in a particular language, which is testimony, the mother tongue of the church. The words we choose to describe what we see, therefore, come from a biblically colored lexicon, a biblically patterned grammar. We choose them in the company of other believers, who are narrating and confessing their own witness. The question for this move is, "What do you believe about what you have seen?"

afternoon, or the same evening every week for group work. We might commit to trying a new exercise every week or repeating the same ones for a month. Whatever we choose to do, whether it is stream-of-consciousness journaling or a specific creative writing task, we have to remember: the time spent is never wasted. Even if we cannot see any obvious connections between our describing and the sermon that is waiting to generate, the point is to engage in the discipline, to keep up the habit, trusting that good (and inspiration!) will come of it.

### Exercises for Describing

Take that same biblical text. Get yourself a large, blank artist's sketchbook, bigger than the standard 8½ x 11-inch pages that frame so much of our reading and writing. The blank pages unline your mind and free you up to write as big or small as you like. The size of the paper expands your imagination. The pencil or pen you will have to use literally gets you off the computer and slows you down. The physical motion of your hand on the paper taps into different parts of the brain that are underutilized in this Internet culture. The quality of the paper invites you to try painting or collage making within its pages (and probably takes you back to elementary school art). The thickness of the sketchbook lets you work on many ideas, exercises, texts, and sermons at once. The awkward size and heft make it stand out among your other books and folders, reminding you of the foolishness of your calling. Lugging this sketchbook about takes a little getting used to, and you will probably either love it or hate it at first. My students who initially hate it (but still have to do it, since I'm the teacher) get through the first sermon and report—with a great show of irritation and much heaving of sighs—that they still hate the stupid notebook, but they have to admit: it helps. I think their irritation is just splendid and excellent practice. The text can be irritating, too.

So get that notebook, and take out your text.

#### 1. Image it

Make a list of images that appear in your text (light, water, salt, blood, seed, vine, etc.). Take one, close your eyes, and say it aloud. Let yourself "see" whatever words or pictures appear to you; then, after a moment, open your eyes and write down everything that came to you. Don't edit; just write rapidly, no matter how bizarre; your mind is telling you some-

thing, making a connection that isn't readily apparent to you. Now reflect on what you have written. What connections do you see?

## 2. Rewrite it

Many of my students have done this on their own out of frustration and found that it provided the seed to the sermon. Rewrite the text in your own words. You can try this from memory, checking later to see what you left out or added (what do those omissions or additions tell you?!), or you can start with a word in the text that is especially interesting or challenging to you—such as “blessed” in the Beatitudes. What does it mean to be “blessed”? Look the word up in a dictionary or thesaurus, or check Hebrew and Greek translations; rewrite the passage using each of the possible meanings (“Blessed are they . . .” becomes “Helped are they . . . chosen are they . . . happy are they . . . holy are they . . . set apart are they . . . prayed-for are they,” etc.). What do your rewrites of the text say to you? Where do they stimulate you to go?<sup>5</sup>

## 3. Slang it

Youth ministry folks do this all the time. Rewrite the text in the particular idiom of the young people in your congregation, or some young people who are marginal to it. Put the youth themselves in it; imagine a present-day setting for the text (the church? a mall? a high school dance? track practice? a gritty street corner? the school cafeteria?). If you need ideas, ask some youth to help you. See where your imagination takes you.

## 4. Character-sketch it

Write a description of someone in the text, either a character or perhaps the author or narrator. Imagine what this person looks like, how she talks, what she ate for breakfast, what he picked out to wear this morning. What is he doing in this text? What does she want? What obstacles are before her? What strengths and weaknesses does he have? This is a good way to draw on our attending skills and take them further.

## 5. Monologue it

Pick a place to stand in the text. It might be in the shoes of a character in the story or a character on the fringes of the story who doesn't even

appear in the text; it might be the narrator, or a young Sri Lankan woman as you imagine her reading the text. Write a short monologue in the voice of this person. Describe what you see in the text. Describe what you hear and smell. Tell what is breaking your heart or making it sing. This is an excellent exercise for getting some momentum going when you are stuck. The sermon may have nothing to do with the monologue in the end (and probably won't), but the exercise will likely begin to move you.

## 6. Dialogue it

Do the same thing, but this time write a dialogue for two people. If you want to take the exercise to another level, ask two volunteers to read the parts for you, so you can see how it actually plays. Make revisions to the dialogue if you like. Play with the subtexts. See where it takes you. This is an excellent way to involve people in your sermon preparation process and introduce them to new ways of interpreting the text.

## 7. Text-jam it<sup>6</sup>

Extend the monologue and dialogue exercises by writing a short scene or dramatic piece based on your text. You might try translating it directly into dialogue, or you might write an original piece based on the text with completely new characters and settings. Again, ask some people from your congregation or community to help you stage it, just to see what happens. This is fun to do on a regular basis with people who like theatre and like to experiment and might enjoy this phase of interpretation. Some of the students at our seminary have started a "text jam" night; they bring the texts they are working on and take turns enacting the material. The point here is not to come up with a finished performance piece (although you could!), but to see where the interpretive work takes you. A text jam could become another form of weekly Bible study, and it works well with all age groups, or even intergenerational groups (how about older women and young people together?).

## 8. Letter it

Write a series of short letters based on the text. They might be from a child who is writing to her pastor to ask questions about the text. They might be from a character in the story who is writing to another character, or to an imaginary one (what would Mary write to her high school teacher about this annunciation thing that has happened to her?



What would the Corinthians write back to the apostle Paul, either collectively or separately?). What makes this exercise especially interesting is to only write *one side* of the correspondence. Imagine that the pastor or teacher has written back but don't actually compose those letters. Stick with one voice. Again, see where it takes you.

## 9. Dream it

Keep a journal near your bed. Read the text before you go to sleep; pray in its words and images. In the morning, as soon as you wake up, write down what you can remember of your dreams, without editing. Don't worry if you forget parts; that's fine (this isn't psychotherapy). You will begin to notice two things: (1) how easily our unconscious minds free-associate, jumping around between scenes and characters and not bothering with the gaps; and (2) that dreams are powered by emotions, not logical narratives. The conscious mind constructs a narrative to *evoke* an emotion; the unconscious mind constructs a narrative *around* an emotion. Reflect on your dreams; ponder them; pray about them. They probably won't hand you your finished sermon on a platter, but they may (and often do) contribute, in surprising ways. Think of this as an experiment; be grateful for what comes.

## 10. Journal it

If dream work isn't your thing, try journaling on the text. This is a practice that many preachers swear by; they notice a depth in their preaching when they have given themselves the freedom to write whatever comes to mind, stream-of-consciousness style, for a set period each day. If you need stimulation to get your journaling going, try reading the newspaper each day with your text in mind; when you finish reading, start journaling immediately. Or find a poem that you like that reminds you of something in the text, and riff on it for a while in your journal. You can journal after visiting parishioners or as a means of prayer. The point is that it gets you writing and into the writing habit.

## 11. Change it

Write the text as you wish it were. Change whatever bothers you, upsets you, offends you, grieves you; write it the way you wish it had happened. Write it the way it should be, in your view. What does your rewrite tell you?

## 12. “If-only” it

Imagine what you would say about the text if you could. Imagine what you would tell your listeners, in the best of all possible worlds (for example, what would you say . . . if no one would get mad? if Mr. and Mrs. X wouldn't be offended? if the youth were the only ones listening? if the election weren't happening? if the building campaign weren't happening? if it would stop the war? if you only had the nerve? if you only believed it were true?). Start with the phrase “If I could, I would say \_\_\_\_\_,” or “The sermon I wish I could preach would say \_\_\_\_\_.” Write fast, without thinking. Put it away. Come back in a few hours, or the next day. Is it still true? Is it still the sermon you wish you could preach? Or has it become the sermon you can preach?

### III. TESTIFYING: WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO SAY?

The third move toward the sermon for a testimony preacher is the practice of *testifying*, or finally saying what we have seen and believed. The contextual nature of preaching—that *we* are the ones saying *these* words to *these* people—has a strong bearing here as well, but with more urgency, as preachers come face to face with issues of relevance and love: Why are these words important to say to these people whom I love? What do I want to give them, with this sermon? Preachers also confront the fullness of the message itself and its implications in that suspended time between knowing what we *want* to say—and then saying it. The testimony move inevitably brings us to the authority question: Can I really say that? How can I, when I have no proof? How can I, when I am only \_\_\_\_\_ [complete sentence with some quality about you that makes you less than adequate and/or unqualified and/or marginal in this situation]? The question for this move is “What are you going to say?” but there is a powerful *why* that propels us through it: Why am I saying this? Because I saw it—and I believe it. I believe in this Word.

#### The Most Dangerous Question

There is no denying that this is the most dangerous part of the sermon preparation process. Testimony comes with a cost, for us and for our