

# 10

WAYS TO

CRAFT A COMPELLING FIRST SENTENCE

## IMPROVE YOUR SERMON BY SUNDAY

DO SOMETHING UNEXPECTED

AVOID "CHURCH LANGUAGE"

LET GO OF "WHAT AM I GOING TO SAY?"

BACKSTORY PREACHING

# Ten Ways to Improve Your Sermon by Sunday

The Rev'd Dr. Lisa Cressman  
Founding Steward, Backstory Preaching

## **1** Let go of: "What am I going to say on Sunday?"

This is an anxious, performance-minded, don't-want-to-embarrass-myself, check-the-box-off-the-list approach to preaching.

Read the texts slowly, in several translations, as if you are praying them.

Then handwrite the texts, or draw pictures of it (stick figures do very nicely!). Notice every detail. Let the texts affect you so you become part of the narrative.

Slow down, breathe.

Scripture will tell you what to say.

## 2 Craft a compelling first sentence

Possibilities:

- Ask a question.
- Say something outrageous.
- Launch directly into a story.

Give a fact about a biblical character that we usually overlook: Abraham passed off his wife Sarah as his sister; Saul (later to be Paul) directed gangs to expose early followers of Jesus; Mary Magdalene was chosen to be the first to receive and proclaim the Good News.

## 3 Work in an inspiring environment

Buy flowers for your desk. Move your desk in front of a window.

Light a candle.

Put a “do not disturb” sign on your door to claim quiet time.

Organize your home or church office: declutter, give away old books; rearrange the furniture.

Turn off electronic notifications.

Indulge in a new, special mug and great coffee or tea that are reserved only for sermon prep.

# 4 Avoid “church language”

Grace. Forgiveness. Reign of God.

Words we use all the time.

But what do they *mean*?

Especially with online preaching and new folks listening and watching, we can't assume they have a Christian background.

Rather than rely on words and phrases we assume listeners understand, describe them.

What does grace sound like to the ear when offered by another?

What does it feel like in your gut to receive forgiveness that you know you don't deserve?

Paint a picture of the reign of God. Moses described a land of milk and honey on the other side of the desert. In concrete terms, what would happen if we actually loved our neighbor like ourselves? What changes would be made, what tangible evidence would you see of love in action?

# 5 Craft your composition— *then make an outline*

Whether you preach from notes, a manuscript, or keep it in your head, to keep people listening what we say has to make sense. It has to have a coherent through-line that guides listeners to the sermon's conclusion. Without a logical progression and leading transitions listeners get bored, restless, and their minds wander.

How can you check that what you've prepared doesn't go off-point? Take your composition and make a traditional outline from it.

Using the exact words in your composition, write out the draft's main points, the supporting points under each of those, then the details under each of those.

The places that are a struggle to fit into an outline are likely places that wander off topic, are extraneous material, or indicate there's more than one sermon.

Conversely, if you notice a skip in logic between the points or feel like something's missing, you can fill in those gaps until it flows from start to finish.

## 6 Land the final sentence

The entire sermon is leading to one single point: the last sentence. It's the last thing people will hear so make it count.

Make it short, punchy, and pithy to sum up in a single, memorable sentence what you most want your listeners to remember.

## 7 Play up conflict

I don't mean play up conflict between "sides" of an issue. I mean, play up the conflict inherent to the text.

Consider the conflicts between human vs human; human vs nature; human vs God. What does each of them want? What gets in the way? How do they strive to get what they want? How is the conflict resolved?

For example, a human vs human conflict arose when James and John angered the other disciples. Right in front of them they asked Jesus whether the two of them could sit at Jesus' right and left hands when he came into his kingdom (Mark 10:35-45).

What did James and John want? To feel they were more important than the other disciples. How did they strive for it? By asking Jesus to grant them their wish, which he denied. How was the conflict resolved? When Jesus explained to all the disciples that to be part of his kingdom was different than the ones they were used to: they were not to lord power over others but be servants of all.

Notice the conflicts when our expectations about how God is supposed to act aren't met in real life; the conflict when the flaws in our biblical heroes are revealed; or the skips in logic, the things that just don't make sense.

Tease out these conflicts and eventually resolve the tension with the Good News.

## **8** Do something different

Predictable preaching is dull and boring. It makes it a steeper hill to climb to keep people's attention.

If you always start with a story, start with a question.

If you always preach the same kind of message, offer the kind of message a preacher you respect preaches.

If you always tell a story for your sermon illustration, use a repeated refrain, an image, or a parable that leaves them hanging as much as Jesus did with his.

# 9 Preach with empathy

What worries your listeners?

What are they afraid of?

What subjects do they avoid and why?

To bring the Good News to *your* listeners' concerns, walk in their shoes for a while.

Even when those shoes don't "fit" you and you think they should never put those shoes on in the first place, walk in them anyway.

Imagine a day in their lives. Imagine what raises their fears. Feel those fears as if they were your own.

Now, what's the Good News have to say to *those* fears?

# 10 Rewrite a parable in contemporary terms

Think about the story of the "Prodigal Son."

Who is a modern day equivalent of the wayward son?

The resentful older brother?

The patient and long-suffering father?

Let your sermon be a re-telling of a parable and introduce it to indicate it's not a true story with something like, "There was once was a mother with two daughters..."

Don't explain the parable at the end.

Conclude it in the same way the parable ends in the text.

The Prodigal Son, for instance, leaves us with a cliffhanger as the father stands outside the party with the elder son. We don't know what happens next.

End with the same cliffhanger (without saying "Amen"), a moment of silence, and then go sit down.

## Conclusion

Use any one of these ten suggestions and your sermon will get a boost of creativity, and your listeners will be more engaged so they'll hear the Good News!

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## About Backstory Preaching

At Backstory Preaching, preachers thrive in the craft, process, and spirituality of their preaching.

Wherever you left off in your homiletics training in seminary, Backstory Preaching picks up so you continue to grow in your preaching practice.

Through weekly sermon prep resources, continuing education, coaching and mentoring, and our growing online community, Backstory Preaching helps preachers who:

- Struggle to get their sermons done on their schedule
- Lack confidence
- Seek high quality continuing education without leaving home
- Feel isolated



- Don't have a reliable sermon prep process
- Have lost touch with God
- Are solid preachers looking to grow
- Are bored with preaching
- Are looking for fresh perspectives and insights

Let us know how we can help you thrive!

Look for us on our website, [www.backstorypreaching.com](http://www.backstorypreaching.com), or write to Lisa at [lisa@backstorypreaching.com](mailto:lisa@backstorypreaching.com).



## Ten Ways to Improve Your Sermon by Sunday (Summary)

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- 1 Let go of "What am I going to say on Sunday?"
- 2 Craft a compelling first sentence
- 3 Work in an inspiring environment
- 4 Avoid "church language"
- 5 Craft your composition—*then* make an outline
- 6 Land the final sentence
- 7 Play up conflict
- 8 Do something different
- 9 Preach with empathy
- 10 Rewrite a parable in contemporary terms