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The following material is taken from his book How Shall They Preach (Progressive Baptist Publishing House, 1977). It grew out of Taylor's Lyman Beecher Lectures (in this instance lecture three). In it he addresses the steps for building a great sermon.

BUILDING A SERMON

FROM WHERE DO SERMONS COME? There are perhaps few preachers who have not pondered this question, sometimes in quiet reflection and sometimes in desperate anguish when the vision tarries and Sunday morning does not. Piety replies to such a question by saying quickly that sermons come, of course, from God. This is the truest, easiest and, maybe, the most misleading answer imaginable. One says that it is misleading because there may be in this answer a subtle temptation to us to shirk our responsibility for preparation. Alexander McClaren spoke for many an earnest preacher when he said: "It is hard to strike the right mean between trust and negligence, and I am sometimes afraid that I may shirk responsibility and omit doing my part on the plea of leaving God to order our ways."¹ The heart of the preacher's dilemma is how to trust God wholly and at the same time to prepare diligently.

There may be some rare exceptions among us, but most preachers will discover that the word God gives us to utter will not often be by the direct revelation of open heavens and the thunder of God's own voice spoken to us in the English language and in the accent of our particular region. I must confess that rarely in these nearly forty years now of attempted preaching have I been "given" a sermon full fashioned and complete, though I shall never forget a night in Cleveland during my early years in New York and at a stormy moment when such a word did come, based, how memorable, on the passage in I Peter 2:20, "... but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God." Most of us discover that sermons are born of a mysterious romance between preparation and inspiration. Dr. Paul Scherer used to say that inspiration is 10 percent genius and 90 percent firm application of the seat of the pants to a chair.

Let every person who would preach be well aware that whatever even approaches acceptable pulpit work on any sustained basis will never come without effort and even anguish. Facile, easily produced preaching almost always falls under the judgment made upon a preacher

by Andrew Thomson, the nineteenth-century Scottish preacher who from his pulpit at St. George's restored culture to the pulpit of that land without obscuring the cross. A minister who was a keen fisherman once said to Thomson: "I wonder you spend so much time on your sermons, with your ability and ready speech. Many's the time I've both written a sermon and landed a salmon before breakfast." "Well, sir," replied Thomson, "I would rather have eaten your salmon than listened to your sermon."² The faithful preacher, willing to pay the price in study, prayer and that meditation which is a "sitting silent before God," will find rich reward for his pulpit work.

Sermons come in many ways. They come by study of the Bible. Anyone who will open himself or herself to the revelation of God contained in the Bible will find endless preaching, better still, will be found by it, which demands to be delivered of the preacher by pulpit presentation. Once years ago while preaching in Louisville, I heard a distinguished black preacher, Dr. E. M. Elmore, say that no one ought to die without having read through the entire Bible. I had always shied away from this as a kind of pointless rote, but that morning in Kentucky I felt moved to begin such a practice. There will be barren stretches in systematic reading of the Bible, since it is the record of the long journey sometimes through desert country which the Eternal God has taken to find His children, long lost and long mourned. At the same time, anyone who will undertake systematic reading of the Scriptures, day by day, will find the Living Word leaping up out of the words of the Scriptures. One who does this will often be startled at how directly and immediately the Bible addresses our own life and that of our time. P. T. Forsyth commented that he did not believe in the verbal inspiration of the Bible. At the same time he said that "the minister ought to find the words and phrases of the Bible so full of spiritual food and felicity that he has some difficulty in not believing in verbal inspiration."³ This will doubtless be the conclusion of anyone who reads the Bible regularly and systematically and with the mind ready to grasp and the imagination ready to see what it is saying here and now to those to whom God has sent us. In all of this we must not forego reading and listening to comprehend what the Bible is saying to our own lives in those appointed times when we make ourselves available to what it has to reveal to us.

One finds it difficult to lay enough stress upon the necessity for the preacher to open his [or her] whole being before the Scriptures. Altogether too much preaching, particularly in what are called the mainline churches, is too flat, too horizontal, too colorless, too unimaginative. Much of this can be overcome if those who preach would catch the sounds and sights and smells of the accounts recorded in the Bible. Enter as much as you can into the climate of each scene. Let the imagination and the mind work at the same time. Hear in the words of the Biblical record, the long, solemn, and yet tender love call of the Everlasting God aimed at His erring and straying creation. Hear how the words of the Bible sound, at countless points, its first and dominant theme of God's overtures to us and then that of the perennial wistfulness, the still, sad music of our humanity, whose loveliness and loneliness and lordliness run through the Bible.

Never miss the central thrust of it all—God reaching out in this way and that for a people whom He loves and who vainly feel that there must be some other way to make it than by surrender to Him. In the creation accounts, for instance, never miss what is central, the questing, imperious journey of God's word and will invading in the name of an order and purpose within Himself all of the recalcitrant chaos or whatever there was, or was not, to which He addressed

Himself. My black preaching predecessors used to speak of that scene as God speaking, "before there was a when or a where, a then or a there, before the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy." What resistance, what stubbornness did that sovereign utterance encounter and yet which would not be frustrated or denied? Well might the preacher ponder if this recalcitrance in the face of the questing, determined creative Word of God is not the summary of all history. What of that Word which became flesh at Bethlehem and in Nazareth and Galilee and Jerusalem, at Calvary and in a cemetery addressing itself to the formless, the void, the darkness in every human creature and in every age? One so reading the ancient accounts discovers their timelessness and their timeliness.

Sermons are everywhere, for the critical encounter between God and his creation, and particularly his supreme creation, human kind, is forever occurring world without end. You will remember the familiar words of Shakespeare in *As You Like It*.

*And this our life,
exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees,
books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones
and good in everything.*

These words may sound inappropriately cheery and are doubtless uncharacteristically bright for Shakespeare, but in them is the truth that we are addressed, and by God, in so very many ways. One may say that there are entranceways to sermons much in the same way the Book of Revelation described the City of God with its wall "great and high and had twelve gates. . . on the east three gates; on the north three gates; on the south three gates; and on the west three gates."

So, one who preaches may confidently look everywhere for sermons, not snooping, mind you, nor in panic casting about desperately on Saturday for something to preach about the next morning. Rather, we must be open and ready to hear what men have to say about God, consciously or unconsciously, and their need for him. The preacher ought to hear, for instance, a scream for help, that help which cometh alone from the Lord, in the somewhat flippant comment of one of America's most durable matinee idols when he said, "I am for anything that will get a man through the night." What is more important, the preacher must be open and ready to hear what God is constantly saying in the public and private affairs of people. David H. C. Read tells us of "Karl Barth's image of the preacher as the man with the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other."⁴ Another way of putting this is to say that the preacher ought to read the Bible with split vision and he or she ought to read the morning newspaper with split vision—one eye, so to speak, turned to the written page, the other open to the invasions of the Almighty which come like chariots of fire that, suddenly appearing, excite the heart and astonish the senses.

Ponder the mystery and majesty of the seasons in order to give color and contrast to your sermons, but even more so that your own spirit might appropriate the brown wistfulness of autumn, the leaping green joy of spring, the heat and stillness of summer, and the white death of

winter. Scan the skies sometimes and remember that, as a man said in the long ago, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge." Seek sometimes the ageless sea and hear in the evening its deep melancholy dirge. Lift up your eyes unto the hills and contemplate their strength and steadfastness, so like the God whom you preach. Do all of these things not in any pretense of having an artistic nature, not self-consciously nor as a poseur, but that the scenes and subtleties of nature might sink deeply into you to help you preach the Gospel of the Son of God with its lights and shadows, its glad, green springtimes and its word to the wintry seasons of the soul.

Any preacher greatly deprives himself or herself who does not study the recognized masters of pulpit discourse, not to copy them but rather to see what has been the way in which they approached the Scriptures, their craftsmanship, their feel for men's hearts. Harry Emerson Fosdick, himself now in that select company of immortals to be studied, confessed somewhere that old Frederick Robertson of Brighton primed his pump, as he put it. Arthur Gossip has meant much to me. I once heard Dr. James Stewart describe Gossip's preaching as being "like a river at spate." There is much to be learned in study of the crisp, colorful epigrams of Joseph Fort Newton who revealed a richness of imaginativeness and a strange wedding of awe and familiarity in considering the Divine Heart. Search out those comparatively few printed sermons of the black giants of the pulpit, John Jasper, C. T. Walker, L. K. Williams, William Holmes Borders, J. H. Jackson and my own colleague in Brooklyn, Sandy F. Ray. I do wish you could have heard the musical thunder of J. C. Austin's voice and his gift for metaphor and flights of transfiguring eloquence.

No one interested in preaching can afford to ignore John Jowett of Carr's Lane and Fifth Avenue whose language was so chaste and so telling. Paul Scherer, my old preaching idol, is available in print, though you really needed to hear the poetry in his preaching inspired and enlivened by "a prophetic quality which springs from the depths of the man as Fosdick said of him. Frederick W. Robertson, whose star rose so brightly at Brighton only to be extinguished so early, has been called the supreme pulpit craftsman of the nineteenth century, though not a few people would want to raise question about such judgment. His sermon, "The Loneliness of Christ," a transcript out of his own troubled soul and the one on "The Israelite's Grave in a Foreign Land," preached at the death of the Queen Dowager in 1849, must rank easily with the finest pulpit work known to Christian history. One ought to come to know Alexander McClaren of Union Chapel, Manchester. Robertson Nicoll, whose comments on the English and Scottish preachers of the late nineteenth century are unrivalled for touching insight and sharp analysis, said that if you read a sermon of McClaren's you must take his outline or get another text, so apt and inescapable was the logic of McClaren's mind. Study George Buttrick's relentless, close reasoning clothed in phrase of purest beauty. You will want to know F. W. Borehain whose mind and heart saw sermons and examples of the Lord's love in commonplace scenes.

So the preacher must be willing to look deeply and honestly into himself, for in those depths, touched by the light and flame of the Gospel, will much of one's preaching find birth and life. This is not easy nor painless, since such a viewing may easily lead to a kind of morbid introspection or to "that worst form of selfishness, self-pity," as old Dr. William Orlando Carrington said publicly to me on the night of my induction as minister of Concord Church in the

years now far gone. At the same time, a preacher looking upon his own spirit too indifferently or casually misses the depths that are within himself and is likely to become a pulpit dealer in small talk, a purveyor of platitudes, perhaps the most obnoxious kind of preacher conceivable.

This of which I now speak has its anguish, but one must pay that price to gain access to the deepest and most secret places of the human spirit. Let no preacher count the pain of his self-confrontation as being unique and without precedent. Almost all of the fine preachers have been persons who have carried, often very privately, some great emotional stress and more than infrequently a sort of melancholy which showed itself in a kind of remoteness and pensiveness, though this is not to deny that many of them in lighter moments have been people of sparkling humor and warm companionship. This remoteness is difficult to explain and must be stated guardedly since God alone can help us if we strike poses of piety or mock gravity. Indeed, this is not meant at all; what is meant is a kind of brooding, unmorose introspection, as if listening to some mysterious, wistful music within.

We have only to read those involved, almost tortured autobiographical glimpses which show themselves in the writings of Paul to see what is meant by the anguish which claims so many who become the remembered preachers. Listen to him now and campaign in the name of his King up and down the cities of the Empire. "Troubled on every side ... perplexed ... persecuted ... cast down ... always, bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus . . ." or that other well-known confession, "There was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me." Epilepsy, some other malady? Whatever it was, there is also here a man looking soberly at his own circumstance and because of it finding a clue which will enable him to put the trumpet again to his lips and to sound a new and yet more glorious note to the honor and in the service of his Sovereign Lord.

On this note we must not dwell too long, but you will find that most of the truly helpful preachers have done their work against the background of some humbling "negative." Alexander McClaren was so shy he could not undertake to talk to a servant girl about her soul.⁵ Spurgeon suffered with rheumatism most of his life and spoke of his body as, "capable of the most acute suffering."⁶ Once his depression grew to such size that he intimated resigning.⁷ Joseph Parker of London's City Temple "had periods of such serious depression that he would talk of giving up his work and of secreting himself in obscurity until he should be called away from an unprofitable life."⁸ Dr. George W. Truett whose preaching charmed the American south during the first four decades of the twentieth century, carried through his preaching years the memory of a tragic hunting accident which resulted in the death of a friend. Lacey Kirk Williams was perhaps the finest black preacher of the first half of the twentieth century. There were an aloofness and a pensiveness about him which may have been due to the tragic failure of an only son.

Many people remember the bright, shining years of Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick at Riverside Church in New York. They are not aware that Dr. Fosdick's early ministry knew a breakdown which culminated in his being confined to a sanitarium in Elmira, New York, for four months. What Dr. Fosdick described as "the most hideous experience of my life" occurred because he was "high strung and sensitive."⁹ He wrote "without that experience I do not think I would have written one of my early books, *The Meaning of Prayer*."¹⁰ Surely the memory of this experience and the sensitivity which caused it had much to do with the great preaching gift of Fosdick and his capacity to reach people at their depths. Those who knew Dr. Martin Luther

King, Jr., will recall that even in his lightest moments there seemed some darkly brooding element in his makeup; this pensiveness showed itself in the lifted, solemn, sometimes almost melancholy cadence of his pulpit oratory. Let us not make too much of this, but let anyone who feels betimes such a Clark and brooding quality not lament it unduly. This sensitive, sometimes sad quality can be an avenue of great insight and of deep and searching preaching by which the Lord who has called you gets at the deepest and most vulnerable places of other people's hurt hearts with the healing Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The sense of melancholy which possesses most of the ablest preachers is not the whole story. The other side of the personality of the person who preaches is an amazing and breathtaking sense of a visitation and enablement from outside, the power of God manifested supremely in Jesus Christ. It is this exhilarating awareness to which Marcus Dods refers in commenting on the Seventeenth Chapter of Genesis. He says:

Faith is not a blind and careless assent to matters of indifference; faith is not a state of mental suspense with a hope things may turn out to be as the Bible says. Faith is the firm persuasion that these things are so, and he who at once knows the magnitude of these things and believes that they are so must be filled with a joy that makes him independent of the world, with an enthusiasm which must seem to the world like insanity.¹¹

And so, more often than not, bearing his or her own inner pain and experiencing an inexplicable, interior ecstasy, the preacher offers that Gospel which bruises and heals, which kills and makes alive.

There is a sweet, sad music in our humanity, placed as we are in this mysterious scheme of circumstance which we call life. Here we are with some years, the number of which is mercifully hid from our view. We only know that we feel under a strange compulsion to do something worthwhile with them. The days of our years are filled with lights and shadows, joy which leaps almost uncontrollably now and again, sorrow which in its turn settles like a terrible weight upon us. There are the people who come in and pass out of our lives. It is a mysterious journey and people are subject to many moods. There seems at the same time in all of this, and yet not identical, a pressure upon our lives, a sense of some sanctity in us, a beckoning toward some dim but unbelievably lofty destiny, an aura of august splendor and glory on our days. Of it my own forebears sang in their strange joy- sorrow meter:

*Looked over Jordan and what did I see
A band of angels coming after me.
Looked all around me,
it looked so fine
I asked the Lord if it all was mine."*

To see this, to become part of it, to hear and to vibrate with what God is saying in the midst of all of this and then to come among poor humans bearing the interest of God in their plight, this is the high calling of the preacher.

¹ Howard, Harry C.: *Princes of the Christian Pulpit*, page 310. Nashville, Abingdon Press (Cokesbury Press), © 1927.

² Taylor, W. M.: *The Scottish Pulpit*, page 183. New York, Harper & Row (Harper & Brothers), 1887.

³ Forsyth, P. T.: *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, page 26. London, Independent Press, Ltd., 1907.

⁴ Read, David H. C.: *Sent from God*, page 14. Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1974.

⁵ Howard, Harry C.: *Princes of the Christian Pulpit*, page 306. Nashville, Abingdon Press (Cokesbury Press), 1927.

⁶ Day, Richard: *The Shadow of the Broad Brim*, page 174. Valley Forge, Pa., Judson Press, 1934.

⁷ Day, Richard: *The Shadow of the Broad Brim*, page 175. Valley Forge, Pa., Judson Press, 1934.

⁸ Howard, Harry C.: *Princes of the Christian Pulpit*, page 283. Nashville, Abingdon Press (Cokesbury Press), 1927.

⁹ Fant, Jr., Clyde E., and Pinson, William: *Twenty Centuries of Great Preaching*, Vol. 8, page 134. Waco, Texas, Word Books, 1971.

¹⁰ Fosdick, Harry Emerson: *The Living of These Days*, page 72. New York, Harper & Row (Harper & Brothers), 1956.

¹¹ Dods, Marcus, *The Book of Genesis*, A. C. Armstrong & Son, New York, 1912. Permission granted by Harper & Row, present copyright holder.