

Preaching Familiar Passages with Creativity

Preaching familiar passages can be a challenging experience. Epistles in particular can seem to lead to repetitive preaching styles. What are the challenges of preaching such texts? Is there any more to be said on this passage? Can the congregation be taught anything they haven't already been taught here? What are the goals of preaching well-known texts, and should they differ from other, less familiar texts? If so, how? This session will offer direction for creative preaching of epistles that maintains high faithfulness to the text.

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I. Familiarity breeds . . . but familiar to whom?

A Biblical passage which has been preached to the assembled congregation multiple times and/or has been preached multiple times by the given preacher.

A. Familiar to the Preacher: The Danger of Assumption

1. *I've already done this one!* – Reaching for the filing cabinet

There is an increasing temptation as a preacher gains experience, competence and confidence – laziness!

2. *I know this one!* – The problem of competence

The challenge to all preachers is to pursue relationship with God in His word, and communicate the good news of this relationship in the sermon event.

3. *“Look at what God is saying – to us!”* – The devotional life of the preacher

B. Familiar to the Preacher and the Congregation: The Danger of Information Transfer

1. *What else is there to say?* – Another assumption

There can be an increasing temptation as listeners gain knowledge – a thirst for increased knowledge, or new ideas about a text.

It is important to distinguish between a fresh, vibrant sermon and a message full of novelties or impressive gestures which do not appeal to the heart.

2. *Changed lives vs Good memories*

C. Familiar to the Congregation Only(!): Comments for Young Preachers

1. *Let no-one despise you . . .* – the case for study and preparation

When the time comes to preach the sermon, no preacher should be unfamiliar with the text!

Nevertheless, preaching to older and wiser Christians (or even other preachers) can be daunting. Prayerful preparation should be concerned with God’s message for this people at this time.

2. *People, place in time . . .* – the case for context

II. Why Preach the Familiar Passage?

A. Seasonal Sermons and Big Bible Themes

1. Christmas, Easter, and other seasonal sermons
2. Alternative passages on seasonal themes?

B. Occasional Sermons and Big Bible Themes

1. Funerals, Weddings and other occasional sermons
2. Alternative passages on occasional themes?

C. Assigned Passages

1. Guest preaching
2. Consecutive preaching

There is nothing *wrong* with a familiar passage! It is tempting to think that we have to be always innovating, always creative, always somewhere surprising. But just as children will repeatedly ask for the same bedtime story, and adults will revisit the same movie of choice, so churchgoers are fine with a Christmas message at Christmas, or an Easter message at Easter. Sometimes in trying to be clever we simply fail to connect. Don't be afraid to preach one of the gospel birth, cross or resurrection narratives!

III. Approaching the Text / Sermon Creatively

A. The passage in context and the changing exegetical idea

1. Preceding material
2. Following material

B. Preaching “planks” instead of “slices”

C. Taking application seriously

1. Variation in application for different groups
2. Time and demographics, variations in application in one group

D. A change of perspective

1. First-person preaching
2. Storying
3. Inductive text-work preaching

Freshness can be introduced into sermons on familiar passages in a variety of ways. How does the passage function in the immediate context of the surrounding passages?

How do some of the themes of the passage relate to the book as a whole?

Application is likely to change with the listeners to that sermon. Variations in belief, culture, worldview, age, context, demography, etc., will all bring a distinctive group of listeners together, for whom broad, generic applications will rarely *grip*.

Planks and Slices

If you take a log, there are various ways to cut it. It doesn't take much skill to hack at it and get it into chunks. But a skilled woodcutter can produce a beautiful slice showing all the rings. Or, they can produce a long plank of wood that reveals some of the grains working their way through the entire log.

Typically sermons are like slices. We take a unit of thought and seek to bring its impact into the lives of those listening. But there are times when we should be working with planks, and specifically, with tracing a grain or two through the whole book or Bible. Let's probe issues of producing planks for the pulpit!

Let's think about working with a single book. Here are some thoughts:

1. Every book has grains working through it, and the best way to find them is to spend a lot of time in the book. Seems obvious, but if we preach after only spending time in a slice, we will miss the grains that are present. Be sure to read whole books multiple times.

2. Some grains will be more pronounced than others. It isn't a competition between grains, but we should be alert to those that are real building blocks for a book. It would be a shame to spot the eschatological hope theme in Romans, but miss issues of justification, righteousness and faithfulness. In Mark a lot of comments go to the "immediately" and the "secret" themes, but we mustn't miss the question of who is Jesus, or the issue of the cross.

3. Some grains will be located in a section, others will traverse the entire book. The theme of the eschatological city in Hebrews 10-13 is massively important for that section of the book, but it might not register in the earlier two-thirds. However the motif of forward momentum does carry the reader through the whole sermon to the Hebrews.

4. It won't be possible to have every grain have impact in a sermon, so select carefully. For instance, in John's gospel, themes abound including belief, glory, light/dark, world, truth, I am, the Spirit, abiding in, etc. To preach with all possible grains highlighted in any section will probably overwhelm listeners.

5. Tracing the grain can bring great variety to a series. Instead of just chopping a book into chunks, why not introduce and conclude with an overview that traces a particular grain through the whole. It will bring out a whole new dimension for people.

I'm pondering table fellowship in Luke, but also pondering how to not overwhelm with a theme that pops up in almost every chapter.

<http://biblicalpreaching.net/2012/07/31/planks-and-slices/>

(See parts 2, 3, and 4 online)

Recommended resources

Preaching:

Jeffrey Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety* (Kregel, 2007)

Kent Edwards, *Deep Preaching* (B&H, 2009)

Darrell Johnson, *The Glory of Preaching* (IVP, 2009)

Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Baker, 2001)

Bible & Epistles:

Richard Erickson, *A Beginner's Guide to NT Exegesis* (IVP, 2005)

Ron Frost, *Discover the Power of the Bible* (Harvest House, 2000)

Ray Lubeck, *Read the Bible for a Change* (Authentic, 2005)

Thomas Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles* (Baker, 1990)

Timothy Ward, *Words of Life* (IVP, 2009)

Ephesians:

Clinton Arnold, *Ephesians: Exegetical Commentary on the NT* (Zondervan, 2010)

Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker, 2002)

P.T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Pillar NTC, 1999)

www.biblicalpreaching.net – daily posts from Peter Mead relating to sermon preparation, delivery and the life of the preacher.

www.cordeo.org.uk – weekly posts from Peter Mead and Ron Frost relating to spiritual formation and applied theology.