

## Inspiration Points

*Planning the high moments in a message.*

You have probably driven up a mountain road through tall trees with only glimpses now and then to tell you what lies beyond. Then comes a scenic overlook where the advantages of your climb are spread before your wondering eyes. You pause nearly speechless and let time stop while you look at the beauty before you, hoping somehow to videotape that moment into your memory to replay on some future, dreary, desk day. Sometimes that scenic overlook has a name: Inspiration Point.

Sermons should have inspiration points, scenic overlooks where our climb through a Scripture stops to allow us to look with wonder at the spiritual scenery.

I have occasion to listen to dozens of sermon tapes by as many different preachers each year, and I have been struck by how seldom preachers invest in the hard work of developing inspiration points in their sermons. There is much explanation, some illustration, occasional passion; but there is little beauty, few breath-catching moments, seldom need for a moment of silence to take it all in.

We are wary of oratory, suspicious of the overwrought, overheated language of grandiloquence. But too often we are not eloquent at all. We just want to "put the cookies on the bottom shelf." Our motto is K.I.S.S.: "Keep it simple, stupid." We want so badly to preach plainly that our sermons are sometimes no more memorable than a phone call.

To be sure, inspiring language comes more easily to some than others. Some preachers have the soul of a poet. Language for them is a palette, a keyboard, a block of marble. Some of us find inspiration points a waste of precious Bible time. "Just the facts, Ma'am." That mindset likely does not care for poetry either, or *Pilgrim's Progress*, or *Screwtape Letters*.

The main reason our sermons lack inspiration points, though, is developing them is such hard work. We are taught to exegete and research, to marshal thoughts into an outline, but professors never upped our grade in seminary for writing something beautiful, for painting a word masterpiece, for setting a text a-singing. As we guide our listeners up the mountains of Scripture, however, we misguide them if we do not stop at some inspiration points.

After we have done our study to rightly understand a text, we must pause to think about what is before us. Where is the beauty, the poetry, the wonder in this text? If I do not see it, I haven't stopped long enough to look at the view, for no passage of Scripture is a mere parking lot. All Scripture is inspired by the same God who tosses off sunsets every night. Even genealogies have inspiration points!

### Crafting inspiration points

---

Look for a truth that has become too familiar. Look for a phrase everyone takes for granted.

Look for a metaphor that puts a paintbrush into your hand and a canvas before your people. Look for a moving photo where you can point out what people might have missed in the black-and-white of print. What is the melody of this passage? What would a poet see? Ask God to heal your blindness and release your tongue!

Scenic overlooks don't just happen to be along the highway. Someone saw the possibilities and engineered a wide spot in the road, cut away the brush that hindered sight, and put out signs telling us what is coming. Preaching an inspiration point takes some rhetorical engineering also. Several different tools are at our disposal:

#### *Story.*

We should illustrate off and on throughout a message, but for this purpose a story must do more than clarify a point; it must inspire. It needs to be a story with pathos, but it absolutely cannot be sappy. A story that tastes like syrup is nothing more than a sugar rush. An inspiring story must have the ring of truth, and it must have first truly inspired us as a window into this biblical truth. To try to inspire others with a story that did not move us is a form of hypocrisy.

#### *Quotation.*

As with illustrations, some quotations are tools we use only to clarify. A pithy definition, for example, or a well-worded summary by a recognized authority. But sometimes we come across a jewel of eloquence that will help our listeners see the beauty in the Word. I occasionally read Alexander Maclaren for just that reason. We have all benefited from favorites like C. S. Lewis and Spurgeon, and among the contemporary, Frederick Buechner, Max Lucado, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

#### *Stacking.*

That's what I call the method I learned listening to African-American preachers, where a series of several clauses of similar sentence structure are stacked one upon another.

C.L. Franklin (father of soul singer Aretha Franklin) was a noted preacher. In a sermon about Doubting Thomas, he chose as an inspiration point Jesus' statement to the disciples when he appeared in the upper room, "Peace be unto you." You can hear the "stacking" cadences of these words: "He knew how doubtful some of them were. And he knew how afraid some of them had been. And he knew how their faith had been tried. And he knew what a terrible ordeal they'd gone through. And think about how consoling his address was. Listen at him: 'Peace be unto you.'"

#### *Extrapolation.*

This is a simple tool of the imagination where we take a biblical phrase and state some of the wonderful implications. It becomes an inspiration point when we paint pictures rather than explain.

Billy Sunday could have said, "In heaven we will live forever." Instead he turned that truth into an inspiration point: "In heaven they never mar the hillsides with spades, for they dig no graves. . . . In heaven no one carries handkerchiefs, for nobody cries. In heaven they never phone for the undertaker, for nobody dies."

*Expanding a biblical metaphor.*

Many word pictures run throughout the Bible. If we come across such a metaphor in our text, pick up its strain from the rest of Scripture.

For example, Ephesians 2:20 says Christians are "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone." The preacher might say:

There, deep beneath us is the great foundation stone of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, his mighty cross and his powerful resurrection. Locked up against that stone is God's covenant with Abraham and the stone-carved Law of Moses.

There are the great granite blocks of the prophet Isaiah: "His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace"; and of the Apostle Paul: "It is by grace you have saved, through faith"; and John the Revelator: "See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed."

And there, atop those great blocks, the blood-red bricks of the martyrs and the fire-baked bricks of the reformers. And then, above them, rise our forefathers in the faith, and finally, our own lives, for we too are part of this great temple that rises to God—for we "are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

I love calligraphy, the visual art of words. I have framed on my office wall a portion of a prayer written by James Weldon Johnson in *God's Trombones*, because it reminds me to be an inspiration point preacher:

And now, O Lord, this man of God, who breaks the bread of life this morning... put his eye to the telescope of eternity and let him look upon the paper walls of time. Lord, turpentine his imagination. Put perpetual motion in his arms. Fill him full of the dynamite of thy power. Anoint him all over with the oil of thy salvation, and set his tongue on fire.

Lee Eclov is pastor of the Village Church of Lincolnshire, in Lake Forest, Illinois, and a consulting editor to Leadership Journal.