

The Wanderlust of Series Preaching

Enjoy the sheer pleasure of preaching sequentially through Scripture.

by Lee Eclov

***" Faraway places with strange sounding names
Are calling, calling me. "***

That old song captures how I feel when it is time to plan a new sermon series. It's one of my favorite jobs as a preacher. I'm like those vagabonds who study atlases and have travel brochures spread out all over the kitchen table, people with passports full of stamps and beat-up suitcases with travel stickers all over the sides.

I almost always preach in series, and when the time comes to begin planning a new series, I start laying out Bible Books and themes in my mind like those travel brochures.

Sometimes I look to a Book I've never preached on. Ecclesiastes, for example. It seems far-off and mysterious to me, a rugged adventure, like visiting Nepal. I think, *Lou told me it was one of his favorite series, perfect for postmodern thinkers.*

Other times I think about a theme our church might need to consider, like prayer or evangelism or family relationships. Since I am also exclusively an expositor and rarely do topical sermons, I start building a mental database of passages I might address. Maybe there's one section of Scripture that I could build that series around.

Packing the bags

It usually takes me several weeks to settle on a new destination. I pray often for God's direction, read through sections of Scripture that somehow catch my attention, and ask other leaders for their input.

An in-depth sermon series is like living in a new country for a few weeks or months. As one series draws to a close and a new one is ready to launch, I feel like someone finishing his packing. I write articles for the newsletter and website telling people what's coming. I often buy a couple new commentaries and start thinking how we could supplement the series in our worship times and in other activities we recommend to our congregation. For example, in my current series from the latter part of Hebrews I'm challenging people to read *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a perfect side trip to this series stressing perseverance and faith.

As I begin to study for the series, I feel like someone exploring a new country. Of course, I don't usually come to a new study completely ignorant of the Book or the theme, but still I feel like someone who has only seen it out bus windows and now it is time to get an apartment and live here awhile. Each Book of the Bible, each Scriptural theme, has a culture and flavor, its own geography and history, its own songs and scenery, villains and heroes. And I can't wait to experience them. And when the last sermon is preached, I feel I'm saying a wistful farewell as I put away the books and file the sermons in a drawer, as though I'm looking out an airplane window for one last look.

A ministry memory album

I have a record book where I keep track of every sermon I've preached—date, place, text, title—and looking back through that list is like looking at old photo albums. To page through old sermons is even more sentimental for me. (*Oh, yes! I'd forgotten about that insight. Or, Oh, I remember that morning now! Or sometimes, I need to pay another visit to that place and pay better attention next time!*)

Among my fondest ministry memories are sermon series I've done. Recently some friends at church returned from a long-anticipated vacation to Italy. "It was better than we

imagined," he said. "It was so beautiful and interesting. We'd go back in a heartbeat!" That's how I feel about series I've preached.

When I look back, I think about doctrines that have become much more clear and precious to me. Sometimes I remember particular moments of wide-eyed insight, as I understood Scripture passages I'd never thought much about before. I remember, too, how God linked what I was learning from the Bible to my life experiences during those series, the way our computers put Internet links in blue print. I remember how I saw Scriptures put on work clothes and boots as I preached them into practice for my flock and me.

There, on the first page of my records, is my very first series, Joshua, for my new church, faded in my memory but a treasure. I still think about a line from the sermon on how all 12 tribes had to keep up the fight till all had peace: "None of us can rest, till all of us can rest." And there, 15 years later, is Joshua again, for a new congregation. It was that second time through that I came to love old Caleb so much. He "followed the Lord his God wholeheartedly."

When I think of my first sermon series at my present church, I always smile. It was First John, chosen because the congregation had been through so much turmoil that I thought we needed to be reminded to love one another. I smile because I had never liked First John very much, truth be told. I thought it was redundant: "God is love, love is God, love everyone, love, love, love." But like everything else I've studied in the Bible, I found it was rich and layered, perfect for our launch together.

Ooh, there in 1993 was my worst series. I won't go into it, but I should have prayed that whole idea through more thoroughly!

I did a summer series once on Bad E.g.s in the Bible. Each week was a different "baddy" like Cain, Manasseh, and Judas. They were fascinating studies, although I wonder sometimes now if I should have stuck with grander themes.

Last fall I tackled one of my most challenging series. It was a study on the tabernacle called The Architecture of Prayer. Here we have all this Scripture describing the tabernacle but little explanation of the meaning. It was like sermons without words, a theological picture book. I was put off by most of the books I looked at because they seemed to attach meaning to every blue thread and bronze post holder. But as I prayed through each message, and visualized each space in the tabernacle, the biblical pictures became vivid and meaningful to me, and I hope, to my people. I understood in a fresh way what happens when we pray and how fellowship with God is intended to work. I still picture that Holy Place as the "living room of the Almighty." Those images still guide my prayers and worship, especially now as I preach in Hebrews.

As I look through my sermon "album," I see how often I've preached in Luke. I love that Book. And there in 1989 is my favorite series ever: Revelation. For better or worse, I'm not much on prophecy, and I didn't cover that Book from front to back. I skipped a lot of things I just didn't know how to do. My goal was to draw our attention to the great themes of worship, endurance, and hope. I remember that often in that series the sermon was early in the service so we could worship after we considered the Word. And oh, how we worshiped! That series still shapes my language in prayer and worship. And I remember at the end of the series feeling as though my vocabulary was exhausted. My imagination lay panting like a marathon runner! I hope God directs me to do it again one of these days.

Sooner or later my vagabond feet start itching again. Where to next? I start spreading out the brochures on the table again. How about a series from the last week of Christ's life? I suppose the elders will suggest I do another stewardship series one of these days. How can I approach that this time? I don't think I've done Jonah before. I wonder if that might be what God has in mind.

"Faraway places...calling, calling me."

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