



THE PROCESS PREACHING SYSTEM

BY JEROME F. LARSON

Back in high school, whenever someone delivered a speech by reading a manuscript, our speech teacher said, "A speech is not an essay on its hind legs." In this way she encouraged us to speak more freely. Even though I remember her words well, I spent the first 25 years of parish ministry reading my sermons. On several occasions I tried with no success to stop reading my manuscripts word-for-word. Then, in 1990 I enrolled in a DMin program with the goal of preaching more freely.

The process preaching system grew out of this program. Process preaching combines writing a manuscript with speaking freely, a combination known as extemporaneous delivery. Unlike an impromptu delivery, where one speaks off-the-cuff, an extemporaneous delivery includes two major preparations — writing and oral rehearsal.

The process preaching system recognizes that written language and oral language are very different ways of communicating. During the oral rehearsal process, one converts the written language of the manuscript to the oral language of preaching. This system enables one to preach the sermon freely without reading exactly what has been written. When I began extemporaneous preaching, the congregation's response was immediate and positive. I had a new sense of connectedness to my material and to the listeners.

In this article, I will briefly introduce the process preaching system and its three parts: purpose, writing, and delivery. This three-step process provides a road map to preaching freely in the extemporaneous mode. Even if in the past you have read your sermons to good effect, you may wish to add extemporaneous preaching to your preaching toolbox.

Process 1: Purpose

After you do your preliminary text study, write a purpose statement that gives your sermon direction. The purpose grows out of study of the text or theme for a given Sunday. I suggest beginning the purpose statement with the words: *After this sermon the congregation will . . .* Using this formula sentence helps the preacher focus on a particular audience and on a particular goal for the sermon. For example, if the sermon focuses on Christ's love, the purpose statement might read: *After this sermon the congregation will know the love that Jesus has for them.* Make the purpose statement as specific as possible. It should also express a reasonable and attainable goal for the sermon. The statement can contain more than one goal. For example you could add to

the statement above: *and willingly share that love with those around them.*

Once the purpose statement is written, it becomes a guideline for everything that goes into the sermon. Your sermon will be easier to write, it will be more focused, and it will be easier to preach. When your brain knows exactly what you want to say, it easily comes up with the necessary words and phrases. Make a copy of the purpose statement and tape it to your computer screen or the top of your desk for easy reference as you write.

Process 2: Writing

In sermon preparation, nothing substitutes for writing. In writing the sermon, the preacher compiles everything collected during research and reflection on the text.

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Extemporaneous delivery includes two major preparations: writing and oral rehearsal.

In 2008, the comedian George Carlin received the Mark Twain Award for humor. Throughout the ceremony, Carlin received praise for his dedication to writing. It turns out that although he always spoke freely in his act, he painstakingly created his material in his study. Sermons, like comedy acts, need to be written. An extemporaneous sermon requires a well-written manuscript in order to be effective.

Here are three keys to writing a manuscript for extemporaneous delivery.

Write your sermon in sections or blocks. Most sermon manuscripts lend themselves to division into blocks. A block can be the introduction or conclusion, a story, a retelling of the text, or any number of other things. You can include as few as four or five blocks or as many as ten or twelve, depending upon the length of each block. Writing in blocks facilitates extemporaneous delivery because the sermon can be rehearsed one block at a time.

Create a flow chart. In the process preaching seminar I teach, I offer students a flow chart, an 11" x 17" sheet of paper on which to sketch the preliminary plan. It includes a place to write the purpose statement, a possible title, the text, and a list of items a preacher may include in the sermon. It also includes an area in which to determine the order of the blocks. Once this preliminary plan is completed, you have a guide for writing.

Write for an extemporaneous delivery. During delivery, the spoken words will differ from what has been written as the preacher converts the written word into oral language. This makes it unnecessary to carefully craft every sentence. Although it is important to use your best writing skills, you do not have to make things perfect. If, at a later time, you wish to publish or offer a printed copy of your sermon, you can edit the manuscript and adapt it for a reading audience.

Process 3: Delivery

After creating the sermon in the writing process, prepare to deliver it freely. This delivery process centers on a certain kind of oral rehearsal. It takes about an hour of rehearsal for a 15-20 minute sermon. During this oral rehearsal, convert the written language of the manuscript into oral language. I call these oral rehearsals "run-throughs." The preacher takes the manuscript into the pulpit, but uses it only to guide delivery. The steps outlined below will help you achieve an extemporaneous delivery.

Location. Find a location where you have complete privacy. The sanctuary would be the best place to do the run-throughs. Other possibilities are a small chapel, the fellowship hall, or even your private study.

Timing. Do your run-throughs as close as possible to the time of delivery. The particular kind of memory you use in this process only lasts about 24 hours. If you do your run-throughs any earlier, you risk forgetting everything before you preach.

Run through it, run through it, run through it. Begin your run-throughs by looking at the first block of your sermon. Read it to yourself, but not aloud. Once you see what you have written, turn away from your manuscript and try to say what you have written, not word-for-word.

You will not get far before you need to look back at your manuscript. This time circle key words or underline important things and then step away and try again. You may get a little further into this first block on the second try. Return to your manuscript once more and read what you have written. Now step away from your script and try again to say what you have written. You may say the first few words as they were written, but soon you won't remember exactly what you wrote. At this point your brain will begin substituting oral language. The meaning stays the same even though the words differ.

During the third or fourth run-through a little miracle takes place. Suddenly your brain figures out what you are trying to say and you can speak the meaning of your script freely without using the exact words on the page. Many of the words and phrases will be similar, but you may say things quite differently.

Continue running through each block separately until you have them down pat. You can wait until the time of delivery to run-through the entire sermon.

Process preaching has a simple goal: preach the gospel with purpose and power. Anyone can preach extemporaneously. No special gifts are required. If you write a well-focused sermon and run through it three or four times in the manner described above, you can do it. For the past six years I have had the privilege of teaching this system to pastors in the Kairos continuing education program of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. Approximately 300 pastors have taken the course and each has learned to deliver sermons freely. I hope I have sparked your interest enough to give extemporaneous delivery a try.

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