

1) What inspired you to publish a book of a collection of your sermons? Why these sermons from February to August 2020?

When I began preaching online due to the COVID pandemic, I received occasional comments to the effect that I should consider making some of my sermons available to a wider audience by putting them in print. After a few months of our not being able to gather in person as church family, I, too, began thinking that a printed collection of sermons might be a good thing. We weren't a technology-savvy congregation, and we weren't particularly interested in or ready for Zoom gatherings and the like. So, I was staying in touch with members and friends of our church mainly through phone calls and a weekly congregational letter. I received many words of appreciation for the way those letters nurtured a sense of still being in touch with one another despite our being physically separated by the pandemic. Then, over the course of the summer of 2020, I found myself thinking about putting together a booklet of sermons as another form of congregational contact that might help to keep us mindful of the ties that bind church family together. By summer's end I began asking myself if maybe, instead of a booklet of selected sermons, I should go all the way and put together an actual book of all the sermons I had preached online at that point—and not just the sermons, but also the things that had been said in each Sunday's greeting and announcements. The point of doing the latter is to keep the sermons situated in our congregational life and, as I like to put it, to turn the book from a collection of sermons into something like a collection of Pulaski Heights Presbyterian services of worship.

As I read through my first online sermon, from March 29, I decided I wanted to actually begin the collection in our pre-COVID days, and I chose February 16, when the sermon text was from Mark 1, where Jesus begins his ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing with the words, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

2) What does this book offer to readers? To the church, the Nones, and the Dones?

For our PHPC congregation, I hope that the book will be something of a morale booster: on the one hand, a reminder of how we strove together at the start of the pandemic to listen for God's word; on the other hand, a shot in the arm amidst our present weariness from the toll the virus has taken, to bolster our readiness to humbly, boldly, and gladly keep on keeping on, no matter what and come what may.

For other church readers, I would refer to what is said in the preface (or, as I have termed it, the Prelude): the sermons are the attempts of one particular sunk-in-sin-and-grateful-for-God's-grace Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) minister to practice and to encourage openness for the truth of otherworldly God's own word, loving us, judging us, redeeming us, and challenging us to do God's goodness justice by striving for the future ruled by God's own truth and grace. As for the Nones and the Dones in particular, I would say that their ambivalence, indifference, and resentment toward the church is not entirely misplaced, and that it has in part to do with the church's own failure to hear and heed God's word aright. And I would hope that, in and through this book, they might catch a glimpse of a door to a church that's very different from the one they now shun.

3) How would you explain the purpose of preaching, and what is the significance of preaching for the life of the church and for the world?

I'd like to respond to that question with the two quotes that are found on the front and back flaps of the dust jacket to the hardcover edition of the book.

From Karl Barth: “The sermon should never have as its subject familiar truths such as the grandeur of faith, or Christ and country, etc., or known or relatively little-known truths that are sought and found in the Bible. Instead, it must point to the truth that is absolutely unknown, and do so with the hope and prayer that this truth, the *al theia tou Christou* (truth of Jesus Christ), will now itself speak and make itself known through the ministry of this simple reference. We must always keep this in view as the point of preaching, namely, that behind the biblical text stands the truth that is absolutely unknown to humans but that wills to disclose itself, making itself the absolutely known truth by the call of the church.”

And from Edward Farley: “Even as the divine mystery is not just one among several constraints of preaching but something that pervades and reshapes all of the criteria, so it suffuses preaching’s language with an aura of transcendence. Without connection to the divine mystery, the other criteria degenerate into the finitizing idolatries of popular religion. This is why the most serious issue and task of a rhetoric of preaching is the allowing of the divine mystery to set language atremble....The divine mystery, not just biblical passages or even the world of Gospel, is what makes sacred rhetoric sacred. The sermon is a rhetorical entity that would give voice to what cannot be voiced and communicate what cannot be communicated—the mystery of God.”

And please note that I’m not trying to say how well or how poorly my own sermons measure up to the standard laid down by Barth and Farley. I’m simply saying that it is fair to measure the purpose and significance of my sermons and of the sermons of others by such a standard. And to put it in my own words from the Prelude: preaching is about working with sensitivity, insight, and perseverance at learning to proclaim God’s word in human words that will invite understanding and renewal in the church, that will encourage among worshipers an honest, attentive, responsible, and forthright witness of faith and hope and love, and that will embolden worshipers to do God’s goodness justice.

4) Is there anything else you would like for readers to know about the book? Or about the writing and publishing process? Or about your own theological inspirations or theologians who influence you?

I submitted a finished manuscript a year ago with no idea that things would take so long. There was, though, an extensive (and important) process of designing, formatting, editing, and proofreading to go through. And during much of that time, I was a solo pastor without a lot of time to spend on this project. With the shift last July 1 to sharing pastoral duties with LaWanda Harris, I’ve been able to devote more time to finally getting the book into publication.

As for inspirations/influences, again I’d point to something said in the Prelude: “I am not aware that I preach with an eye or ear to a particular homiletic style. I can, though, identify five books that are of particular importance to me regarding preaching: Karl Barth’s *Homiletics*, Angela Dienhart Hancock’s *Karl Barth’s Emergency Homiletic 1932-1933*, Charles L. Campbell’s *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching*, Thomas Long’s *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral*, and Edward Farley’s *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church’s Ministry*. Then, too, there is Edith Stein, who once summed it up in this way: “To stand before the face of the living God—that is our vocation.”