

Pastors Preach God's Message

There are days when we are heavily burdened with grief, fatigue and our own failures. We climb into the pulpit with great struggle, even to the point of asking ourselves at times, "Do I really believe what I am about to preach?"

I had left a land of abundance and traveled to a land of extreme poverty. I had left a land of opportunity and traveled to a land of little hope. I had left a land of liberty and traveled to a land of bondage. Yet I found a congregation full of life and joy. But as I looked into their faces from the pulpit, I could see their pain. I could feel their hunger for words of hope.

What words could I say that would make a difference in their lives? I took a deep breath, opened my Bible and began to preach.

But for the first time in my ministry, I asked myself the question as I stood in that pulpit, "Do you really believe what you are about to tell these people?" I forged ahead believing that the word of God transcends cultures and every human situation. After all, oppressed people wrote much of the Old Testament during times of exile. The Apostle Paul wrote many of his letters from prison, and John wrote The Revelation while exiled to the Island of Patmos. If so much of God's word was birthed from oppression, it could certainly speak to oppressed people.

I forget the text I used that day, but I will not forget the illustration. I had just come from two of the most difficult days I'd ever experienced as a pastor. I had spent those days with church members who had lost three loved ones in a house fire. As the news trickled in about the tragedy, it was discovered that the fire was not an accident. The man had shot his daughter, shot his wife, set the house on fire and then shot himself. It's not possible to comprehend the grief that this man's mother, sister and other family members felt.

From what I'd been told, I knew the members of Second Providence Baptist had experienced trauma not unlike those members of my church. The civil war had

claimed lives from virtually every family. Though there was a temporary cease-fire, the killing threatened to break out again any day. Six months later, Monrovia fell to the rebel forces.

Within the city, only 15 percent of the people had jobs. Health care was nonexistent. In fact, less than a year after I left Monrovia, the pastor and associate pastor of that church died of illness.

As I preached, I shared the story of the suffering family I had left. I wanted to illustrate that living in America isn't one's salvation. Living in a big house and having a great job don't guarantee happiness. Having good health and a beautiful family doesn't always lead to a peaceful home.

Many people in Third-World countries believe that the answers to life are found in another land—specifically in America. I wanted these people to know that the answers to their problems were still found where they looked for them before the war—in God's Holy Bible.

I then spoke of Job—how he maintained faith in God despite losing everything but his life. Then I told the people of Second Providence that should my life ever experience the depth of grief as the family I left in Georgia, the depth of grief that they had experienced in Liberia or the depth of grief of Job, I hoped I would have a faith as strong as all three—a faith so strong that should God strip me naked and take everything from me but my breath, I'd still find reason to worship Him. Then I told those people that they had such a faith and because of their faith, God would sustain them.

When I finished my sermon, Rev. Menjah said, "We thank Dr. Helms for bringing to us today the 'thus saith the Lord.'"

That phrase took me off guard. It's a phrase borrowed from the Old Testament prophets who at times spoke on God's behalf. They often began their oracles with the words, "Thus saith the Lord."

Those words are still uncomfortable to me. I'm no prophet, but I have been called

to preach the Gospel. I diligently study and prepare, carrying out the charge that the Apostle Paul gave to Timothy: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15).

But I am more comfortable with the phrase Jeremiah used to introduce the book of the Bible bearing his name: “The words of Jeremiah.” Although in the next verse he says that these words came to him from the Lord, he put God’s message in his own words.

The words I preach are my words, but it is my prayer that not a word will be preached that isn’t from God. Because I’ve heard people, in my opinion, incorrectly handle the word of truth, I must realize that I too have within me that capability, for my hands and my heart are not always pure. I’d rather spit in the wind or tug on Superman’s cape than to preach anything other than the truth. I know God will hold me accountable for every word I preach.

There is no greater responsibility than preaching God’s word. There is no greater privilege, either. There is nothing easy about the task. Preparing a sermon each week is like having a huge round boulder that must be rolled to the top of a hill. On Monday we begin pushing that boulder. We’ve gotten it there by Sunday. We deliver the message, and then the boulder rolls back to the bottom of the hill. We start all over.

What do pastors do all day? Every day, for at least part of the day, we push that boulder to the top of the hill. How?

By reading and struggling with the Scriptures. By listening to our own lives and to the lives of others. By praying. By looking around our world to discover how God’s truths are being lived out or neglected. By consulting our library of information so we understand Scripture within its context and culture.

Eventually, we sit down and began to formulate a sermon that will help the hurting, convict the sinner, encourage the depressed, challenge the backslider

and lead the lost to salvation. Of course, we can't do all that in one sermon. In fact, on our own, we cannot do any of these things—ever. Without the guiding power of the Holy Spirit in the forming and delivering of the message, we just string together words and waste our breath.

There are days when we are heavily burdened with grief, fatigue and our own failures. We climb into the pulpit with great struggle, even to the point of asking ourselves at times, "Do I really believe what I am about to preach?"

It is often on those very days that someone thanks us in his or her own way for bringing the "thus saith the Lord." It is a humbling feeling to know you were God's messenger to someone in a time of need.

It is on those occasions that I understand how the boy must have felt who watched Jesus take his few fish and loaves of bread and turn them into a meal to feed thousands.

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This column is part three of a five-part series exploring a pastor's work.

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