Language

How to Listen to a Sermon

In the book of Genesis, God's human creatures decide they want access to God. So at Babylon they build the Tower of Babel that will allow them to touch base with God on their own terms. God puts an end to their building project and scatters the people, confusing their languages. That story might indicate that God doesn't want us communicating with one another, but what it really tells us is that God wants to be the source and content of what's communicated. That means that language, when used for those purposes, is a true gift. How language is used in a sermon goes a long way toward making a message from the pulpit into a *living* Word from God.

From the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the Word has been present. And John refers to Jesus himself as the Word made flesh. From the formless void in Genesis to the burning bush, from the singed lips of Isaiah to Jesus' charge to the disciples to "go and tell," God has been present in the Word. For the church's public proclaimers, language is thus of utmost importance. We need to get Christ's benefits delivered without the package being damaged.

The delivery metaphor is helpful here. If your preacher is called to deliver the goods, the language that's used in a sermon can be thought of as the packaging that carries Christ to your doorstep. It could be a plain brown box with a smile on its side. Or it could be wrapped in pretty paper with a bow that gives the contents some bling and helps you anticipate what's inside. But just like with illustrations in a sermon, we need to think about what the language the preacher uses is aimed at.

Different settings and audiences, different Bible passages, different world events and life experiences all require that a preacher consider what the proper language is. Think about how different the language people use in various situations is. There's a big difference between someone telling their story at an AA meeting and a kindergarten teacher speaking to a group of five-year-olds. Tone, sophistication, casualness, and even the emotion behind language all communicate in ways that go beyond the content of the words.

What's more, we all hear language differently. In our great-grandparents' day, the word "kids" was regarded as a word for baby goats — livestock on a farm — and *not* for children.

There are words that can be emotionally explosive. And there's language that might be merely edgy to one audience that is truly offensive to another. That means a preacher needs to consider what language is appropriate for that sermon, on that day, for these people.

Another aspect of language in a sermon is that it can heighten the content or perk up people's ears. A plain recitation of information can move the content from something that blocks people's attention to something that opens up the Gospel by grabbing hold of us. Things like alliteration (repeating beginning sounds like Peter Piper's peck of pickled peppers) or rhymes (think "Georgie Porgie" or "super-duper") aren't in themselves important, but they can help hearers grab hold.

Because English was drawn from so many other sources and shamelessly steals from other languages, it's a remarkably flexible and playful language. But other languages do the same thing. German, for instance, is able to smash so many words together into one new word that Mark Twain said some German words are so long that they have a perspective. Spanish has a delightful freedom in twisting grammar and vocabulary to express things in new ways. Every language born from the Tower of Babel can become a spritely tool for delivery God's promises — no matter what language the preacher speaks.

As you consider your preacher's used of language, you can ask these kinds of questions that will help you see what the language *did*: Was there was a turn of phrase that stuck with you as particularly clever, beautiful, or vivid? Was the language something you'd expect to come from your preacher's mouth in other settings? In other words, was it authentic? Was the sermon too intellectual, casual, or slangy? Finally, did the care your preacher gave to the sermon's language reflect the value they place on the Gospel itself.

We hope the sermons you hear deliver divine drama and lovely, long-lasting grace. See what we did there?