Illustrations

How to Listen to a Sermon

Back in the day, the magazine *Reader's Digest* always included an invitation to send in amusing stories that could be used in the various humor sections: "Life in These United States," "Humor in Uniform," or "Laughter, the Best Medicine." Those are the kinds of stories that work really well in a speech or public presentation. Among the 90 tips it offers to speakers, Toastmasters International coaches people to "use humor, personal anecdotes and conversational language to make your speech engaging."

Those things are always welcome in a sermon. In a world chock-full of digital distractions, a preacher will want to hold your attention. Stories and illustrations can do that. Often they're what we look for in a potential preacher — whether in deciding who to call to your congregation or in finding a church where you can land. But in a sermon all the material beyond the preaching text itself serves a greater purpose. We can't merely think about a sermon being amusing, exciting, compelling, or heartfelt. We need to ask what the preacher used that material for.

Often illustrations serve to expand our understanding of the preaching text. They help us know more about it. Or they can bridge the chasm between the ancient world of a biblical passage and the world we live in. Sometimes a preacher will need to expand the scope of the smaller passage assigned for the day so we know its context. Other times a passage will have connections elsewhere in the Bible that show the broader arc of God's work. Whenever a preacher uses other parts of Scripture in a sermon, they're following in line with Saint Paul who wrote in Second Timothy, "All scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." Scripture interprets itself.

A preacher could also use stories from Christian history to make their point: something about the love story of Abelard and Heloise, or about Hildegard of Bingen, or the 45 Ugandan martyrs killed for their faith in the 1880s. Illustrations could come from secular history that match the point of the preaching text or serve as a contrast to it: Harriet Tubman and escape from enslavement or the dire warning of the robber barons of the Gilded Age. Literature can serve as a source, whether it's a Russian novel or Dr. Suess. And popular culture can be a mother lode a preacher can mine: stand-up comics, bingeable TV, celebrity antics, Motown lyrics.

Sometimes a preacher will use their own experiences as sermon illustrations. That can add authenticity to what's preached, because it can indicate that the Gospel matters to your preacher. But preachers need to be careful with personal stories, because, well, who doesn't like talking about themselves? And too often a personal story could be taken from previous pastoral experience, and a preacher always ought to keep confidences and ask permission before using other's lives as a sermon element.

Wherever illustrations come from, the possibilities are endless. But illustrations aren't their own end. They don't have a place in a sermon to make the preachers a successful speaker. All that extra material needs to have a single goal: making the Gospel of Jesus Christ for you. Its aim is to create access points where God's Word can come to you. A faithful preacher will want to know more than whether you liked the sermon or if you found it compelling. Preachers want to know above all if it was God's Word *for you*.

That means that, when it comes to illustrations in a sermon, we go beyond amusement or liveliness and ask what that material *did*. Did it open your eyes to God's work? Did it provide greater understanding? Did it help you regard yourself in a different way? Most of all, though, we should ask if the illustrations were the primary vehicle of the sermon or if it went in the other direction. If it was God's Word that drove the illustrations, it's more likely the sermon preached on the Word became God speaking to you.