



*Preaching in an Age of
Distraction*

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Capture As You Have Been Captured

A preacher would do well to set up this inner standard: that every sermon will have in it some insight, some personal awe, some wonder of Scripture that is for him or her quite new – and therefore quite exciting. Obviously I'm not suggesting insights outside scriptural and doctrinal integrity; rather, I'm calling for insights that make the familiar idea come alive with a new glory, like a suit or dress that reveals a personality not formerly apparent in the wearer. The longer a preacher serves a given congregation, the more important it is that this kind of creativity mark the pulpit fare.

But how can we be more creative? We can start with assurance: Genesis tells us that we are made in the image of God, and God is the ultimate Creator. This suggests that to belittle our creativity is to discredit our biblical heritage. I believe, with Benjamin Disraeli, that a person "is made to create, from the poet to the potter," but I sense from Jesus' parable of the talents that God has distributed creativity with what may sometimes seem like a prejudice. It is said that when Halford Luccock taught preaching at the Yale Divinity School in the first half of the twentieth century he often had accumulated half-a-dozen sermon ideas on the walk from his home to the classroom. Not many are so gifted. What, if anything, can we do to nurture the creative gifts we do have?

To begin with, we need to stop and look. There's a small but telling detail in the story of the call of Moses. As he watched his flocks by Mount Horeb, he saw a bush that was blazing without being consumed. He said, "Let me check out this amazing sight and find out why the bush isn't burning up." And then, the telling sentence: "When the Lord saw that he was coming to look, God called to him out of the bush" (Exodus 3:3-4).

I think it is not by chance that the inspired writer said the Lord saw that Moses "was coming to look" – or, as another translation puts it, "that he had turned aside." Moses was a person God could use because he took time to find out the meaning of things. After all, he might logically have fled the scene in fear; I'd understand if he had. Or he could have concluded that this phenomenon was none of his business since he was hired to watch sheep, not bushes, and not even extraordinary bushes. I trust I am not straining the Scripture when I note especially that God called to Moses out of the bush. God spoke to him from the place of Moses' attention. I submit that there are places of fire in every passage of Scripture, if only we will pause to look, and that God will speak to us out of that fire.

Why do we miss them? Sometimes simply because we are preoccupied, and sometimes because we're tired. But also because we've been trained to miss them. We have learned

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methods of study in seminary or in Bible training conferences, and we have allowed the method to become a boundary of restraint that prevents our moving into unexplored territory. Captive to our method, we look for the things our method has taught us to look for rather than giving ourselves over to holy awe. There is no book like this Book, but because we work with it week after week we unconsciously protect ourselves against its shocking brilliance. Learn some helpful rules, yes; they can give efficiency to your work. But go beyond them. Creativity needs room.

Obviously, part of our creative problem in this world of distractions is that we are caught in such a cacophony of sound that our spiritual and creative ears find it increasingly difficult to hear the music. And because ideas are being thrust upon us from every side — sometimes forcibly! — our powers of distinguishing the excellent from the trivial and mundane are dull.

If we hope to stimulate our creative impulse we'll have to become more selective even while being compelled to consider more possibilities. As for more possibilities, I recommend reading across the centuries. See, for example, why the great philosopher and preacher Jonathan Edwards thought that the millennium might begin in the twentieth century. (We didn't make it!) Or see if you can find any contemporary writing that compares with that of John Donne in his reflections on death and our connectedness to one another: "Any man's death diminishes me" — God knows that our world needs to realize this. And speaking of Donne, find if you can a deeper sense of contrition than when the poet pleads, "Wilt thou forgive those sins through which I run, / And do run still, though still I do deplore?"

We need, too, to read and listen across culture patterns. Most of us are more comfortable with familiar culture patterns and with people whose thinking is like our own. But we can stimulate our thinking by giving attention to those who are different from us — not necessarily as antagonists, because the antagonist is likely to drive us into a defensive posture where we think only more fiercely in our familiar paths — but as individuals who simply approach a subject from a different vantage point. We see the trees and they see the leaves, and that may make all the difference.

But especially, if we want to become more creative, we need to become better listeners: better when we read and better when we discuss. We need not only to understand what the other person is saying but also how his or her concepts relate to who we are and how we think.

Most of us are inclined in conversation to begin shaping our response to the other person's statements before they've reached the end of their sentence (and let it be said, in your



BOOK EXCERPT

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defense and mine, that this may be because some people don't allow a response beyond nodded affirmation). No matter; we need to become intelligent listeners whether we're attending to the printed page, the iPhone or the luncheon visit. Good listening will quicken our creative skills.

And consider the importance of solitude. There is value, certainly, in group prayer, but it is significant that Jesus often went alone to pray. Sometimes we hear best when there's no other voice than ours and that of God's Spirit. Learn to enjoy your own company; treat it with the respect it deserves. As you draw up a list of individuals you ought to join for lunch or coffee, put your own name on the list. Get reacquainted with your own soul. You may discover depths in yourself that, in your hurry, you didn't know were there. It's quite possible that when you take time to get alone with God, God will allow you to get alone with yourself for a while. If you enjoy what you find there, give thanks. If you find instead that this person bearing your name is quite unattractive, remind yourself that the best of saints have had the same experience, and go as they have to the one who makes all things new. Even you. Even me.

Those of us who are called to preach and teach and write are compelled to be creative. This has been a demanding assignment from the days of the biblical poets and prophets to the present time. One of those poets complained at length that there was nothing new under the sun, but tens of thousands of his spiritual descendants have labored to prove that there are new ways to reveal what is old. And those who have worked at it devoutly and patiently have found new modes of revealing so that the old takes on strategic new dimensions—just right for this hour and this place.

— Adapted from chapter seven, "Creativity and Distraction"