

Title to come: What to call the sermon

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 27, 2009](#) issue

Every other week, on Thursday afternoon, several editors at the Century gather around a cluster of filing cabinets. With the pages of the next issue spread in front of them, they work on coming up with titles for the articles. The editors do this job standing up. I notice that they laugh a lot during the process, which usually involves tossing out outrageous as well as serious possibilities. Occasionally my colleagues try out a title on me or invite me to join them in the process. I always decline the invitation because the imagination required for the task is not my strong suit.

I even dislike having to come up with titles for my own sermons. Earlier in my ministry the process of sermon preparation involved reading the lectionary texts months in advance and identifying a theme or themes that would inform the writing of the sermon months hence—and allow a sermon title to be printed in church publications. The musicians and worship planners appreciated having this heads-up about the sermon themes, and church members were impressed with my efficiency. The problem was that when it came time to write the sermon, the title I had assigned months before felt like a dragging anchor. These days I don't try to create a title until I have written the sermon.

There is still the problem of coming up with a sermon title for the weekly worship bulletin. I struggle almost every week over this. Should I be witty, catchy, cute or profound? Why does it need a title in the first place? Why not call it "A Sermon on Mark 1:1-8"?

Then there is the problem of the sign outside the church. I concluded long ago that the only people interested in the sermon titles posted there are other preachers, and that the whole apparatus is a remnant of the days when people walked by church or rode by in a horse-drawn carriage and had time to read a roadside sign.

The church I served in Columbus, Ohio, was located on a major urban thoroughfare. People drove past the church at 40 miles an hour. Almost nobody ever walked by the

church. A recurring nightmare of mine was that someone would have a major accident while trying to read the sermon title.

It was the practice at that church for the secretary to pass the sermon title from me to the custodian, who would mount it in the glass-encased bulletin board out front. On one occasion I wrote in my memo to the secretary, in the space for the sermon title, "I'll give it to you later." That afternoon, as I drove past the church, my eye was caught by the board announcing that next Sunday I would be preaching on "I'll Give It to You Later."

I am comforted by the knowledge that even great writers had trouble with titles. At the suggestion of his editor, F. Scott Fitzgerald changed *Trimalchio in West Egg* to *The Great Gatsby*. Margaret Mitchell called her novel first *Tote the Weary Load*, then *Not in Our Stars* and then *Bugles Sang True* before settling on *Gone with the Wind*.

Sometime soon, in an act of quiet revolt, I am simply going to give it up altogether and title what I do on Sunday "The Sermon."