

Human and holy: Texts for preaching

by [Luke A. Powery](#) in the [May 1, 2013](#) issue

We wondered what kind of reading ministers rely on for inspiration or help in preaching—apart from reading commentaries on scripture or other materials directly related to the task. Do they draw on certain authors of fiction or nonfiction? Are they influenced by essays, poetry, magazines or children’s literature? Here are some reflections. —Ed.

At this point in my preaching journey, I find myself drawing on or being informed by the writings of theologian Howard Thurman, novelist Toni Morrison and poet Langston Hughes, as well as the musical literature known as the spirituals. Thurman’s meditations and spiritual writings reveal the interface of the human spirit and Holy Spirit and help me stay connected to what is human and Holy; this is important because preaching happens at a human and divine intersection. Morrison’s literature reminds me of the raw history of human suffering, particularly of black peoples’, yet she paints a picture of the broad human need to which preaching is to minister.

Preaching should also point beyond the human need and condition and envision God’s future present world. This is where the poetry of Hughes is enlightening, especially his poems about dreaming. He leads me to “hold fast to dreams” and view preaching as a venue for dreaming God’s dreams and proclaiming the “oughtness” of life and not just the “isness.” Furthermore, music is important to my preaching. In particular, spirituals (in)form my proclamation. Though they stem from the particular historical context of slavery, they have universal relevance. In them, we find the themes of life—suffering, hope, lament, joy, struggle, anger, questioning and faith—in relationship to God. They remind me of the state of humanity and reveal that preaching is a matter of life and death. In addition, they reinforce the musical nature of preaching such that I may even sing an excerpt of a spiritual or a hymn during, before or after a sermon. Music helps me express ideas, feelings and moods that regular speech cannot do. Sometimes a melody can say more than a word.

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