

Preach it: God uses even poor sermons

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 31, 2005](#) issue

In his novel *Barchester Towers*, Anthony Trollope writes: “There is, perhaps, no greater hardship on mankind in civilized and free countries than the necessity of listening to sermons. No one but a preaching clergyman has, in these realms, the power of compelling an audience to sit silent, and be tormented.” Those words flash across my consciousness occasionally, especially since I am part of this remarkable phenomenon. I am sometimes amazed that people regularly come, sit and listen to a sermon, for the most part hopefully and expectantly. They probably give preachers a better hearing than they give anyone else on a regular basis.

We preachers can become our own harshest critics. What preacher has not felt inadequate before this daunting weekly responsibility? But what preacher has not also had the experience of feeling dissatisfied with one’s sermon and then being told afterward by a listener that the sermon meant everything in the world to him, or that it seemed addressed directly to her? That particular experience convinces me that there is a lot more going on between preacher and people than what the preacher puts into it, that God can use even a poor sermon when it’s offered to God in humility, and that people really do listen.

I’m a great fan of Anne Lamott’s books *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* and *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*. Lamott is irreverent, funny, a wonderful storyteller and a great writer. She is also deadly serious about Christian faith and life, and, I notice, she listens carefully to her pastor. After introducing her church, Lamott introduces her pastor: “a tall African-American woman named Veronica” who has “huge gentle doctor hands. . . . She sings to us sometimes and tells us stories of when she was a child.”

Lamott listens carefully as her pastor exegetes Psalm 23, explaining why shepherds anoint the heads of their sheep with oil. She listens to Veronica on rejoicing and on Jesus’ and Paul’s commandment, “Don’t worry! Don’t be anxious!”

Lamott's personal story of faith is remarkable, and an important part of it is the faithful, steady work of a preacher and pastor. She offers another reminder that whatever we may sometimes think about this vocation of ours, it is a big mistake to underestimate the potential of preaching.