

In Advent: Preaching Proverbs

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [April 4, 2006](#) issue

As a lectionary preacher who works mainly on Sundays, I have spent much of my preaching life grazing the well-fertilized pastures that my tradition has laid out for me. Sometimes I press up against the fence, drooling over an especially tasty-looking morsel from 1 Chronicles or 2 John, but on the whole I stay where I am supposed to stay. Recently, however, presented with the opportunity to choose my own lections on an ordinary Wednesday, I bolted through the open gate and preached on Proverbs for the first time in my life.

Proverbs shows up exactly once in the three-year Episcopal lectionary, on a Sunday in the dead of August. If I knew whom to ask about this decision, I would, since it seems a curious one in a world full of proverbial wisdom.

“Forbidden fruit makes many jams.” I saw that one on the fluorescent signboard in front of Cool Springs Methodist Church, just a couple of miles from my home.

“Give Satan an inch and he will become your ruler.” Victory Baptist Church.

“The best vitamin for a Christian is B-1.” Bethesda Fellowship Church.

But churches do not have a monopoly on proverbs where I live. “Courtesy opens more than doors,” reads the sign in front of Clarkesville Elementary School.

At Clarkesville Chiropractic, “A straight spine is the shortest path to health.”

On the four-lane highway, where I am prone to tailgating, proverbs leap off of every other car bumper.

“America: Love it or leave it.”

“It’s a child, not a choice.”

“Caution: Non-exposure to the Son will cause burning.”

Recently I discovered a Web site called NorthernSun.com that has allowed me to get in on the action.

“I’m for the separation of church and hate.” That is the proverb stuck to my bumper now, but it was a tough choice. First runner-up was “Born okay the first time.” The third one was the best of all, given where I live, but I figured it was too much to take in at a red light. “If evolution is outlawed, only outlaws will evolve.”

Now, as in times past, proverbs serve up bite-sized portions of human wisdom. Sometimes they sound like your mother and sometimes they mouth off to your mother. Either way, they reveal the character of those who collect and display them. In a dozen words or less, proverbs give ethical direction. They form and affirm identity. They support conventional values and they overturn them, sticking in the mind better than any sermon ever will.

As Alyce McKenzie writes in *Preaching Proverbs*, “About the only place proverbs do not seem to be found today is in the pulpit.” But why is that? Is it because proverbs appeal more to human experience than to salvation history? Is it because they seem to need so little explanation? A proverb is to a proper sermon what a text message is to a proper conversation. Do you really need a master of divinity degree to unpack a bumper sticker?

Jesus did not seem to think that proverbs were beneath his dignity. According to Matthew, the teacher from Galilee used at least 60 proverbs in public. Some of them were as commonsensical as “No slave can serve two masters,” or “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Others were as baffling as “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather,” or “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

He seemed to know how people thought—not about church, most of the time, but about their real lives on this real earth—about money, work and family; about honor, position and the empire. He seemed to know that if he did not nab people’s attention with some short wisdom about these things, then someone else would. The emperor had his own proverbs, after all. So did the tired guardians of religion-as-usual, along with the purveyors of anything money could buy.

“There’s no rest for the wicked,” reads a Cadillac ad in *Vanity Fair*, “Until the next stoplight, anyway.”

“You’re either with us or you’re against us,” reads the bumper sticker with the American flag.

“Go to God or go to hell,” reads another church sign near my house.

“The question is not will people live by proverbs,” says Tom Long, “but what kind of proverbs will they cherish?” By whose proverbs will people live?

Garbage in, garbage out.

Better late than never.

Let those who have ears, hear.