

Where do sermons go? Sunday-night reflection: Sunday-night reflection

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [June 3, 2008](#) issue

I preached a sermon this morning—one in a long line of sermons stretching back to 1992. I've preached so many sermons by now that I find it almost impossible to remember any particular one. Right now, on a Sunday night, I don't *want* to remember any of them. The discipline of Sunday night is forgetting.

It's strange, but while I can't remember my sermons, I do remember preaching them. And if I close my eyes, I can see myself laboring away at the work of it.

I remember all the places where I have studied: the old office we had for a time in a retail strip mall; a spare room at a lawyer's office where I studied for a number of years; the large, wooden table in the library of the Church of Reconciliation here in San Antonio. I can still see the commentaries stacked here and there. My battered and beloved Greek New Testament off to the side. Pens, legal pads, a computer and the ever-present Diet Coke.

I can see myself delivering sermons in the places where our church has gathered over the years. On the wooden floor of the Duck Blind Lounge, wearing a coat and tie, though no one else did. I wore them because I was young and felt the formality was appropriate for the pulpit. I remember moving back and forth across the checker-tiled floor of Fox Run Elementary School, this time with no tie and a small outline in my hand. Zeke, the school janitor, occasionally would lean on his mop to listen and then meet me secretly after worship to receive communion. Saturday nights at another church was the only time I've preached on carpet, and I didn't much care for the feel of it.

I remember preaching in front of the fireplace of our little church in the woods, and feeling the stone hearth and wooden mantle behind me, and seeing the faces before me. Eight years of that. Eight years of arriving in the darkness just before dawn—happy or sad or depressed or filled with irrational anxiety. But always arriving. Seeing the sunlight coming in the windows. Fussing about the church,

making ready. Looking out the window for the arrival of my friends.

I am considered by many to be a liberal minister, which is the kiss of death for any Baptist preacher with ambition. Fortunately for me I have none in this regard. However, I'm always amused by my reputation, because I am so careful about this sacred calling and the scriptures from which all sermons are born. I have no tricks. I don't tell stories that are not my own. I never do anything but read the text and try to encourage my congregation to wrestle with its meaning, just as I have the week before. That's all I am called to do. I don't have the right to do anything more than that.

That's what I've done for 16 years at Covenant Baptist Church. Preaching for an extended time in one community requires its own set of disciplines. You must have both a long and a short memory: some things you must remember forever; others must be quickly forgotten. You have to be at peace with the changing faces, for all churches exist in a kind of flux. You must love people intensely and let them go immediately. This will wound you, but it is not a wound unto death. At least I hope not. And you must always be wrestling with the scriptures. For it is only from that struggle that you will find fresh things to say on Sunday morning.

Preaching is such an esoteric art form. It requires creativity but only within very rigid rules, like old-school poetry. I'm not sure how to describe my own preaching style—sort of junior Bible scholar meets philosophy major who secretly wishes he were Jerry Seinfeld. Me with the Good Book in my hands, trying to be serious in front of the people with whom I love to laugh and will be laughing in half an hour.

It is on Sunday nights that my mind turns inward and I ask myself, "What have I done with my life? Is this a good and worthy way to spend a life? Does preaching really do anything? Does it help people engage the scriptures, or is it just a little show on Sunday mornings so we can all pretend we still care about being connected to these ancient writings?"

I did the math today. I have been the pastor of Covenant Baptist Church for one-third of my life. And a good bit of that time has been spent preparing and delivering sermons.

One-third.

Of my life.

Is it good to give that much of your life to this calling? It might be a good thing. I do not know, and in spite of what people may say, the answer to that question is neither simple nor obvious. I fear I've lost quite a bit of Gordon in the role already. I fight hard to keep something of myself in the mix. Thank God my friends at Covenant love me and want to know the "real me," whatever that means. Otherwise I would have perished, spiritually, long ago.

I do wonder about all those sermons, though. Where do they go after they leave my mind and my mouth? Do they float among the worshipers, being breathed in and out during the service? Are they taken outside in the bodies of the congregation and exhaled into the air as my words fade from their memories? Are they carried away on a breeze to the heavens? Do they have an earthy scent, like a handful of dirt and rosemary and me?

I think maybe the scent is all that is left of them. I hope it is a fragrance pleasing to the One we worship and serve.