

Astonished again: Texts for preaching

by [Phil Waite](#) 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.

Putting together words that can break through the sea—sometimes the cesspool—of words in which we live seems a Sisyphean task. I look for help wherever I can get it, so I read.

I read the print edition of the *New York Times* daily. I encounter news of events, places, people and cultural developments I wouldn’t have known about otherwise. I read the *New Yorker*, either in print or with its fine iPad app. Stories and vignettes from both these publications often end up in sermons, not because I am looking for material but because they are on my mind as I prepare. The *Christian Century* is indispensable. Both the *Times* and the *Century* curate my reading list.

I am an avid reader of nonfiction, both popular works in history, science and economics, such as Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, and heavier works in theology. The former help me appreciate and understand context, the latter excite me about God and hopefully give my preaching some theological depth. A favorite repeat is David Bentley Hart’s *The Beauty of the Infinite*, with prose I find compelling and passionate. Hart’s work with aesthetics helps me preach with an ear for the sensory and not just the cognitive. Marilynne Robinson and Walter Brueggemann also excite my imagination as a preacher.

I have been wading through Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* for years and find it a wonderful guidebook for preaching in these times. Paul Ricoeur’s *The Symbolism of Evil* is a favorite interpretive framework I return to often, which reminds me just how astonishing the gospel is. My favorite preaching is done by preachers who are

always astonished by the gospel. When I do read fiction it is often in the form of thick, grand, immersing books that take me weeks to complete and are demanding on my imagination. Recent notables include the first two books in Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall trilogy.

Read [*all reflections*](#).