

Wise women: Texts for preaching

by [Ayanna Johnson Watkins](#) 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.

When I’m working on a sermon, I like to have wise women nearby. My favorite is the poet Nikki Giovanni, who tells it like it is. Her books, especially *The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni*, have helped me preach hard sermons about choices, love—and Rosa Parks’s thoughts on a Montgomery bus. Giovanni is brave and vulnerable all at once, and she inspires me to preach the same way.

Author Alice Walker, as well, has seen great success and loss. In her writings she is angry and hopeful at the same time—the warring qualities of a prophet. I look often at *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth*, a collection of her poetry.

Finally, I frequently turn to *My Soul Is a Witness: African-American Women’s Spirituality*, edited by Gloria Wade-Gayles. It’s an amazing treasury of speeches, stories, poems and essays by women like Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and Sojourner Truth. I’ve planned not just sermons but whole worship services using the writings inside; and whenever I come back to it, there’s something new to discover.

Having the words of these women near is like being a little girl again, listening to grown folks’ conversations from outside the kitchen. They may not know I am listening, but their words make me wiser.

Read [all reflections](#).