

Conversations that inspire: Texts for preaching

by [Jonathan L. Walton, Ph.D.](#) 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.

Life is a sermon. Whenever I grab my pen and legal pad, I view myself as a chronicler of the beauty, tragedy, humor, anxiety and ultimate hope that characterize the Christian life. There is a wide range of regular sources for inspiration and example. Aretha Franklin’s 1972 album *Amazing Grace* articulates the pathos of the gospel narrative with simple clarity yet profound conviction. Historian Jill Lepore’s column in the *New Yorker* illumines the complicated histories that structure some of today’s most pressing political and moral issues such as the Tea Party and gun control. Ambrose Bierce’s *The Devil’s Dictionary* lampoons life’s ironies and the American penchant for delusions of grandeur. Definitions such as “adherent, n. A follower who has not yet obtained all he expects to get” reveal that satire remains an entertaining and effective form of social criticism.

Yet the writings of Martin Luther King Jr. and James Baldwin are my most consistent conversation partners. When I think of King in relation to other great preachers, I am reminded of Cicero and Demosthenes. It is said that when the former finished speaking, the people remarked on how well he spoke. When the latter finished, however, the masses cried, “Let us march.” King’s trenchant social analysis was smart though never pedantic. And his rhetoric was familiar but never platitudinous. This is always my goal. Finally, Baldwin was America’s Socratic prophet. The former boy preacher was the master of the first-person narrative concerned with the larger society. Evil, joy, sin and redemption are never in the exclusive possession of someone else, as, for Baldwin, our humanity is ever before us. It is this sort of self-criticism, unapologetic candor and social critique found in Baldwin’s writings that

inspires me as a social ethicist and preacher.

Read [*all reflections*](#).