Seasoned with poetry: Texts for preaching

by Elizabeth Myer Boulton 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.

One night recently I was reading to my children a book about songbirds. There we discovered one of the most beautiful things in the world: a brood patch. When songbirds get ready to have babies, the feathers on their tummies get loose and fall out. The result is a brood patch, an oval of bare skin on the underside of the bird. It turns out that those tummy feathers, otherwise used to keep the bird's body heat in, become a barrier that keeps that heat away from their young. And so, during breeding season, to better to conduct warmth to speckled eggs and then to newborns, songbirds develop a brood patch.

They lose their feathers for the sake of intimacy and new life: "O Jerusalem, how often I long to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, as a songbird gathers her eggs under her warm bare belly."

Children's books that explore science and nature are constant fodder for sermons in our household, as is children's poetry. I once wrote an entire sermon after reading "Instructions Found After the Flood," by children's poet laureate J. Patrick Lewis: "Let the jungles whisper jaguar, whose paw is velvet. / Let the worm explore the globe, his apple. / Let the spider embroider the air."

Similarly, accessible poets attuned to the natural world, and to the moments and gestures of ordinary life, season my preaching imagination: Ted Kooser, Mary Oliver and Billy Collins, to name a few.

Jaguars, worms, children's literature, giraffes, spiders, poetry, songbirds, the way in which the chickens in our backyard rotate their eggs 50 times a day to regulate the temperature—these are the texts I turn to for inspiration as I prepare to break open God's Word that is constantly being made flesh.

Read all reflections.