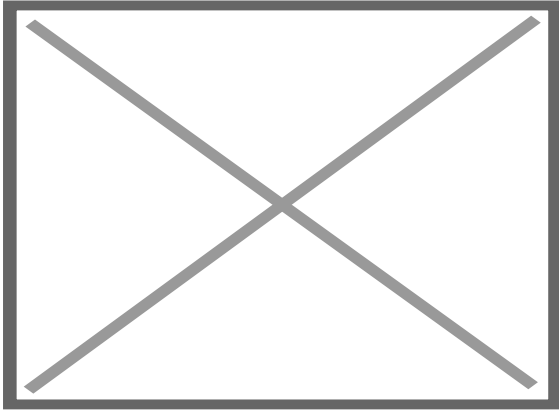


Preach it like Lincoln

By [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#)

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Today is the 150th anniversary of the Gettysburg Address. To mark the occasion, the Abraham Lincoln Historical Library asked a number of luminaries—presidents, poets, sailors aboard the USS Lincoln—to offer their thoughts about the historic speech. But there was a catch: they had to limit their remarks to just 272 words, the length of Lincoln's address. NPR's Scott Simon concluded his essay (essayette?) with [these words](#):

Lincoln's words remind us at once of the brevity of life and the imperishability of humanity. The clock ticks, the calendar flips. No power exists to slow them down or manufacture more hours and years. Abe Lincoln reminds us to make our own lives count by filling the hours we have with what's worthy, kind, funny and honorable.

In a grade-school civics class long ago, I was required to commit Lincoln's words to memory. I made it through, no thanks to "the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced." Now that I'm a pastor, I recognize in Lincoln's words the classic preacher's conundrum: the call to put words around that which is ineffable. At Gettysburg, Lincoln acknowledged the limitations of language—even as he gamely offered words that continue to inspire us seven score and ten years later.

Inspired by Lincoln's address—one of the great secular sermons in our country's history—I hatched an idea: what would it be like to preach a sermon in just 272 words? And because every wacky scheme needs accomplices, I asked preacher friends on Facebook and Twitter to join me.

My social media tribe was predictably bemused. Several people joked that congregations would appreciate beating the Baptists to lunch. One Twitter friend claimed to be a descendant of Edward Everett, who spoke for some two hours prior to Lincoln: "A 272-word sermon is genetically impossible." Another friend told me about a preacher who would sometimes preach the same number of words that Jesus himself used in the day's gospel text.

In the end, some half a dozen friends decided to try on a 272-word sermon for size. Rob Jackson offered [baptismal reflections](#) that were equal parts poetic and homiletical. Jackson, who rarely preaches from a manuscript, said the words came much more easily once he started thinking of it as poetry rather than a sermon. Jen Hackbarth offered [similarly impressionistic thoughts](#) on the already/not yet of Jesus' reign. There is an economy, a thickness, to a 272-word sermon.

Some pastors made the connection to Gettysburg explicit. [David Ensign](#) borrowed from Lincoln's language to talk about stewardship: "Four score and ten years ago, our forebears brought forth on this property a new congregation conceived in hope and dedicated to the glory of God." In a series of short reflections and illustrations, [Vern Gauthier](#) riffed on both Gettysburg and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." (Fun fact: Julia Ward Howe's original five verses are almost the exact same length as the Gettysburg Address!)

As for me, after ten years of ministry I realized how accustomed I have become to writing sermons with a certain rhythm. Preachers joke that we each have about six sermons that we preach over and over with different illustrations. The same might be said of the forms we use. We fall into a natural rhythm, whether it's 10 minutes or 20; whether it's three points and a poem or an explication of the text and a contemporary illustration, punctuated by a YouTube video. We get caught in our own conventions.

And we do well to blast through these routines every now and then. Jesus seemed to do this. Yes, he could deliver a three-chapter barnburner, from the Beatitudes to the house built on sand. But he could also offer a one-sentence parable about a woman kneading bread...and leave it at that.

As much as I credit the Holy Spirit speaking through me as I preach, I felt anxious at having so few words to work with. The church I serve is still wrapping up stewardship season. Could I trust my people (and the Spirit) to fill in the gaps of what remains unsaid? The very question felt like a call to repentance. Yes, we should take this preaching vocation seriously. But am I really so important to the kingdom of God that a 15-minute sermon will do what a four-minute one cannot? As one participant in this experiment quipped, "The world will little note, nor long remember" our efforts.

A short sermon impacts delivery as well. With only 272 words, I was careful to speak slowly, almost meditatively. ([Here is what I offered.](#)) For its part, the congregation appreciated hearing a different style of proclamation—even though people had to work harder to hang on every word, given how few there were. There was a sense all around of having been refreshed by this opportunity to speak and listen in a different way.

And there was a great reverence, even awe, for what President Lincoln managed to pull off a century and a half ago.