

That'll preach . . . someday

By [Jeff Nelson](#)

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"Daddy, build something."

My son and I are sitting on the floor of his room in front of a tub of Legos. I played with most of these exact pieces when I was his age, and I've been excited and proud to see him so interested in them as well. This is a typical afternoon, the two of us huddled over these little blocks and accessories. As much as he likes to tinker with them himself, he wants me to be involved; to try to capture some of the old inspiration that these gave me to make something new. He wants to watch the construction process, and whatever I come up with will surely be a part of the epic Lego battle to follow.

So I set to work. Running my hand through the bin, I find a piece I might be able to use. And then I find another. My continued rummaging eventually finds me quite a pile of interesting bricks and supplementary pieces. They get me thinking of how I can use each of them in different combinations, my mind popping with possibilities.

Eventually, it's time to assemble my creation. I can find a spot for this light piece, but not for this antenna. I could use these wings, but only if I give up on the wheels. Maybe I'll use the propeller, or maybe I'll save it for something else.

The thing is, I'm not completely sure of what I'm making until it's finished. The process has shown me what fits and what doesn't, but I don't know until I get to the end and each piece makes sense together. Some extras for which I couldn't find a use litter the carpet. Maybe whatever I make the next time will require them.

I'm always on the lookout for sermon illustrations. Every book I read, every movie or TV show I watch, every interaction with another, every trip I take, I am always at least subconsciously thinking, "This could preach." Once you've been through the weekly cycle of sermon writing long enough, this just becomes a natural tendency. I constantly wonder how the things I experience might make it into a sermon at some point, preferably the closest Sunday, since I'm on a deadline you know.

Of course, I never know what I'll really need until the end, because I don't know what the sermon is until then. I have my scripture notes, complete with word studies and historical and textual background. I have in mind the liturgical season. I have in mind the situation of the congregation and at least some of its individual members or families. And I have at least a few stories, film scenes, workshop learnings and other miscellany on hand as I think about what to say.

So I start building. I take all of these pieces and start trying to fit them together. This illustration makes sense if I focus on this part of the biblical scene. These two lines from this novel seem to fit if I bring the season to the forefront. This TV show would work if I really want so-and-so to hear a word of hope. Eventually, something starts to emerge, and not all of these pieces make sense to use any more. It is inevitable that some fall to the carpet, unused. Maybe the next week will require them instead. Or the week after that. Or a year or two from now.

It seems to work that way pretty often, really. More immediate experiences seem to be the most ill-fitting for the impending preaching moment. Usually, I have to let them sit within me for a while before it becomes obvious how they might best help communicate to others what God is up to in the world. Every time I run my hand through the bin, it'll be there. I might need it someday. But not yet.

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