

My approach to funeral sermons

It's not about me—it's about God and the deceased.

by [Gary V. Simpson](#) in the [July 13, 2022](#) issue

[Read the main article, "Black men I've mourned."](#)

Each time I do a funeral, I make some simple concessions before arriving at the church.

The sermon will be 20 minutes or less. Religious services, in general, meet with resistance. Nobody wants them to go on forever. And a funeral is a challenging time for those in attendance. It is not the time to showcase my homiletical skills, exegetical deftness, or poetic flare. The funeral is about God and the deceased. I concede that I will not be able to capture the full picture of someone's life in 20 minutes. The funeral service is but a piece of a very long day of emotional drain. So I try to be respectful of people's time.

I am always mindful that grief is cruel and disruptive. It comes in waves, not driven by any sense of rhythm or timing. It shows up at whatever time and intensity level it wishes. I try to take some of the stress off the family by being a voice of assurance. I try to show up as a friend.

The preparation for a funeral sermon is much different than for a Sunday sermon. I do not have a long window to prepare, although I do mark moments for myself when I engage someone: This would be a good story at the time of death. I try to come to the funeral sermon with a story, not a text. A story bears witness to the life that has now been snatched away. Texts too often witness only to themselves.

The funeral sermon is one of those places where good speaking comes from good listening. When I am told of someone's death, I start listening for the whispers of life that arise in conversations with those who knew the person. When I sit with the family, I ask them for stories that capture their loved one's life. What needs to be said in tribute? I read the obituary carefully, and I pay attention to what others say in

their written expressions of thanks.

I also pay attention to people's body language, which can show their grief, sadness, and other emotions. There are people at a funeral who do not want to be there. Their loss is too significant, they abhor being in a church, or they are worried about how others view them and their choice of attire. They are concerned about their time away from work. They don't want to face their own shortcomings, regrets, and mortality.

Still, there is something about this moment. Death gets people to pause, and even the most resistant will go to a place they do not want to be to affirm their love for someone. This moment is the only chance I may have to be an alternative presence from the doctrinaire, judgmental churches and pastors they may have in their heads and experiences.

So my aim is to be gracious and hospitable. Someone's life as we know it has come to its end. There is nothing I can add to or take away from that, and I have no heaven or hell in which to put the deceased.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Approaching the funeral sermon."