

The altar in my attic

My boxes of old sermons are a monument to my church's ongoing conversation with God.

by [Isaac S. Villegas](#) in the [June 2023](#) issue



(Century illustration)

Every Monday morning of my 16 years of preaching, I'd slide open my filing cabinet to add another sermon manuscript to the archive. When I couldn't stuff one more into the drawer, I'd take the stack of pages up the stairs into the attic, where I have bankers boxes of old sermons, and I'd cram my armful of manuscripts into another box—one more building block added to a monument for no one, just there in the darkness of my attic. I don't know why I've saved them.

After my first sermon, I remember feeling awkward about throwing the papers away. So I left the manuscript—with all my scribbled thoughts and marginal notes that came after I printed a draft from my computer—in a folder on the desk. After my next one, I slid the pages into that same folder as if that were now the rule, an accidental office protocol with enduring storage implications. I haven't once gone looking through those boxes in search of my final revisions—the marginalia scrawled with pen, the reworked paragraphs, the exact words I took with me into the pulpit. When I want to remember an exegetical insight years later, I just look at the drafts saved on my computer.

Nor have I put any thought into the preservation of all those purposeless pages. It's more that, at this point, the act of tossing them into the recycling bin would feel like quite the statement, fraught with intention—as if I disliked my work, as if I felt like I had to repent of what I've preached, as if I didn't want reminders of my profession.

When I think about my archive of sermons as an inconspicuous and unremarkable monument to the life of a preacher, I remember John Ames, the central character in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*. Early in the book, the aging, small-town pastor reflects on his stacks of manuscripts. "I wrote my sermons out word for word. There are boxes of them in the attic, a few recent years of them in stacks in the closet," he explains. "I've never gone back to them to see if they were worth anything, if I actually said anything. Pretty nearly my whole life's work is in those boxes." The boxes are a testament to the spiritual and physical toil of preaching. "The labor of words," as Augustine described the homiletical task.

When Ames ruminates on the thousands of sermon pages in his attic, he remembers the struggle involved in sifting through his thoughts in order to write and speak truth—writing as a kind of praying, he says. The boxes in my attic, like the boxes in his, are memorials to conversations with scripture, to prayers with God.

The pile of boxes is like one of those altars from the Bible, where someone stacks rocks on a hill or near a tree to mark a place where God showed up—an altar to remember divine provision. When God sends a ram for Abraham to offer as a sacrifice instead of his son, in gratitude Abraham calls the peak where he had built an altar “The Lord will provide.” The mound of rocks on that mountain is a reminder that God gave Abraham what he needed, when he needed it. When I crawl around in my attic—looking for our Christmas decorations, for example—I see the mound of sermons as an altar or a collection of altars scattered across the weeks and months and years, sheaves of paper that remind me of the God who has been with me in my praying and studying, in my writing and preaching. “For me writing has always felt like praying,” Ames says of the preacher’s life. “You feel that you are with someone.”

There is a constancy to God’s provision. In the discipline of preaching, God finds the one entrusted with the proclamation of the gospel. Old sermons reassure us that when we don’t think we have anything to say, the same Holy Spirit who illumined the scriptures last time will show up again to inspire us. Not only is sermon preparation a kind of supplication for the Word to inhabit our words, but the act of preaching itself is a prayer—a communal prayer offered week after week, month after month, year after year.

The sermon is one part of the conversation with God in a congregation, where the Word has become incarnate within the ongoing life of the community. The calling of a pastor is to bear witness to the life of God, to Christ in our flesh, through preaching. Each sermon is not a final word but the gospel for now, for this week—not for everyone but for a gathered body, perhaps only for the person you met with last week, whose voice is still in your head and whose concern is still in your mind. The preaching life is inseparable from a pastoral life.

When I see those boxes in my attic, I remember the people who’ve populated my thoughts over all of these years. I remember their voices; I remember their lives. My monument of sermon manuscripts reminds me that when we listen for God, we hear the Word echoing through a multitude of people—God’s life in their lives, God’s image refracted through their faces and stories and friendship. The boxes are an altar of gratitude. A reminder that the Lord has provided and that the Lord will provide.