

First pitch: A pastor's Opening Day

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [August 28, 2002](#) issue

When my children were younger, they used to call the first Sunday after Labor Day weekend “Opening Day.” They were referring, not to that long-awaited day in early April when the first major league game is played, but to the Sunday when our life as a family began once again to be determined by the rhythm of the church year, church activity and my weekly sermon preparation. “How’s it going, Dad?” they would ask me. “Are you up for the big occasion?”

As thousands of us anticipate the resumption of church life, and struggle with the homiletical task for Opening Day, we offer an excerpt from *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom in Preaching, Augustine to the Present*, edited by Richard Lischer. Lischer’s previous book, *Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey Through a Country Church*, is engaging, honest, funny, deeply moving and, by the way, full of good sermon material. (See Barbara Brown Taylor’s review, September 12-19, 2001; book excerpt, May 9, 2001.)

Preaching has been in crisis from the very beginning, or as Lischer says, “. . . the whole company of preachers has this in common: all breathe a longing for the renewal of preaching. . . . No one is satisfied with the status quo.” Nothing about the act of preaching a sermon seems to fit with what we are learning about postmodernity. You know the arguments as well as I do—nobody tries to deliver a sustained 20-minute oration containing intellectually demanding ideas in the public arena these days except the preacher. And yet people are still coming to hear us.

I smile as Lischer quotes Reinhold Niebuhr: “Now that I have preached about a dozen sermons I find I am repeating myself.” Who doesn’t know what that feels like, multiplied many times over the years? And yet Lischer’s conviction that “speech grows in the soil of suffering, joy, conflict, and hope” has been confirmed in my experience. The great themes are repeated in texts and in life—and with each year my experience of those themes becomes deeper and richer.

Preachers my age were warned against speaking personally and sharing personal experience, and we have slowly learned the wrongness of that advice. Lischer and

his colleagues have a better phrase: narrative preaching rooted in scripture is a promising new way to fashion a sermon. It has taken me many years to learn that , and to learn to transform the subject and object of the project from God and God's love to me and my story. I'm convinced that people come to hear the old story told by one who's experienced some of it, struggles with it, loves it and feels compelled by it.

It's the end of August and I'm working on Opening Day. Whether you are speaking or listening, I hope it will be a renewal of preaching for you too.