

Preaching in the Dark

When I was much younger, I had a tremendous anxiety problem about speaking in public. Once I found that I had a reason to speak¹, though, I developed a method that allowed me to get by. I wrote out my sermons word for word so that if all else failed, I could fall back on the written word and just read my lesson. Once I had completed the writing phase, I would read it over and over until I felt comfortable with it. Then when preaching, I would be able to glance at it as often as I needed. If I got into trouble I would just read from it and try to maintain eye contact with the congregation. I finally learned to limit my reading preparation to three reads. Otherwise, my morbid anxiety would keep telling me that I had not prepared enough and I would drive myself crazy.

My system worked pretty well until one night I was preaching at a small church in the county. I was going strong when the lights suddenly went out! In the darkness, my inability to actually speak in public was revealed! A flashlight was produced, but it was too weak to help me much. The men of the congregation tried to light the candles that had been used recently in a wedding, but mostly we just floundered around until the lights came back on. I was completely embarrassed!

If I had been a real preacher, filled with the Spirit, I would have been able to continue preaching in the dark. But though the Spirit of God gave the apostles the words that they needed², my mind was a blank. I do believe, however, that the Spirit enabled me³ to create the sermon and the words that I had written down. I just broke the connection in the dark of the moment.

It turns out that all this writing turned out to be a good thing, for it was a process of preparing me as a writer⁴. I learned to craft the structure of the lessons by shaping and smoothing the words that were their building blocks. And eventually I came to enjoy writing as a major part of my life.

1. i.e., for Christ and His Kingdom
2. see Luke 21:13-15
3. see John 16:13
4. Mark Batterson had a similar experience; see his book Soulprint

Luke 21:13-15 (NIV)

13 And so you will bear testimony to me. 14 But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. 15 For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.