

According to imaginative estimates, roughly every 4.3 visitations I go on, I am asked ‘what goes into writing a sermon?’ I answer: well first I look to the lectionary texts assigned for the upcoming Sunday. If they are decent and relatively fresh, they are used. But if they have been recently preached on, I look a little forward or behind in the passages and search for something meaningful (like the reappearance of 7 and 12 – look at their significance again in these texts!). This usually happens on Monday. On Tuesday morning I do several of hours of research, typically before we all meet for staff meeting. In the afternoon, I attempt to put the bulletin together, deciding on prayers and the like, but first asking for hymn suggestions from the all-knowing and wise Mr. Lovett. Then I come up with what I fashion to be a clever little sermon title based on my rudimentary research, before ultimately cleansing my hands of the task and finally hitting **send** to Evelyn. I then usually spend Wednesday and Thursday doing the other things that make up my job – emails and visitations – eventually to come back to the texts Friday morning, where I usually have to think long and hard as to why I came up with that stupid, not-so-clever little sermon title in the first place and try to pinpoint just where my thought process was taking me those several days prior. After a losing bout with memory, my research continues later that morning and usually comes to an end somewhere in the late afternoon, when, if attainable, I then plan to spend a lovely evening with my wife to take my mind off things. We went to the Spring Mill Café this past Friday – charming place. Saturday morning then comes and the alarm goes off at precisely 7:37am and sermon writing takes up the first and last of the day, amidst the sound of children playing, adults barbequing, and the rest of society taking their reprieve.

Now, I’m sure others have a better and more efficient approach to this sermon process as I very much doubt the intelligence and foresight behind this start/stop/start pattern I’ve created and unfortunately sustained. It seems that approaching anything after resting for a time longer than just a short break, requires a rebooting of sorts that uses up more energy than that which was perceived to be gained by said break; thereby rendering the break’s intended purpose to be anything of the sort, rather a detriment along the way.

Earlier in the week I was at CHOP attempting to visit with our friend Chris Nunes, while popping in on another youth who was having an outpatient procedure. As I was riding the elevator up to the Atrium level, a weary-eyed father standing next to me asked me what my child was in for. I promptly told him what I just have you, before extending the courtesy and inquiring into his affairs. He told me that his wife had brought their son in after what they thought was a pediatric stroke. Can you imagine? I confess I didn’t know such a thing even existed.

So after I got home I did some research, and sure enough children can suffer a stroke (it is rare, but it happens) and more, I discovered that there are three different types of strokes... Ischemic, Hemorrhagic, and a Transient Ischemic Attack (TIA).¹ Perhaps you are all less ignorant than me, but on the chance we share a mutual density, let me run through each in brief. A Hemorrhagic stroke occurs when a blood vessel ruptures in the brain, and occurs in about 10-15% of all stroke victims (youth being more susceptible than adults). A TIA is like a mini-stroke where a blood clot temporarily blocks an artery. It occurs in about 10% of stroke victims and can be a precursor for the most common stroke of the three, the Ischemic Stroke. An Ischemic stroke occurs in about 80% of victims and is most frequently caused by a blood clot that lodges itself in an artery and restricts blood flow to the brain. Furthermore, there are three different kinds of Ischemic Strokes, each very serious and very deadly.²

Now, according to David Olson and his book recently published: “The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research on a National Database of 200,000 Churches” only 17.5% of the population attends church weekly. And in other regions of the westernized world, only about 2-8% are regular church-goers. And even if you add in those who attend once every three weeks, those numbers are only bumped up by about 5%. Roughly then 80% of the population are unseated in the pews on a monthly basis. Now, that number is improved upon if you calculate those who show up on the two major holidays and contribute from afar, but 80%... that same percentage of majority stroke victims... remain uncirculated through these doors. My friends, we are in the midst of a crisis, we are facing down an imminent stroke: the clotting and stoppage of new believers is a very real problem threatening our spiritual lifeline.

We need then to seriously examine just how we do church, our liturgy and our approach, and just who we are attracting. And no, we can’t just give up the fight and fall on our swords, saying, *oh, we’ve done enough. We’ve come all this way, we’ll just hold steady here on course, un-open to that which disagrees with our original intent and plan.*

No, because then we would be just like Naaman. Naaman, may we remember was suffering from leprosy and was beseeching the prophet Elisha (not to be confused with Elijah) for his healing touch. And in the course of this beseeching, he starts out from his house, traveling on his high horse, surrounded by both men and chariots, and coagulates to a stop at the door of the great prophet. Elisha sees this approach and sends a messenger down with his prescription. **Wash yourself seven times in Jordan and you will be healed.** Angered that Elisha dared to give him the remedy, but not in the manner in which he was seeking, that is, in a public,

¹ <http://www.fsregional.com/?id=1813&sid=5>

² Ibid. (for all info in paragraph)

face-to-face demonstration, Naaman starts up again and leaves the house of the great prophet muttering to himself, kicking the sand beneath his feet like a kid not given a lollipop in a candy store. My mom says I once did that. Instead of demanding to see Elisha after coming all that way, instead of going further than he originally planned to do, Naaman leaves in a school-boy huff, despondent and a fool. And it's only at the advice and the pleadings of his servants and sons does he later finally acquiesce and do as he was instructed, and as a consequence, is subsequently healed. So much stress and needless effort, Naaman! All you had to do was go a step further on your task, to knock on Elisha's door after coming such a great distance, perhaps then things would have been as you would have wished, not to mention easier and less painful for you!

Now compare all of this to the lady with the hemorrhages from Luke's account. She has been bleeding for twelve years, has spent all that she had on seeing physician after physician and yet still has been left uncured. Furthermore, she has been declared socially and spiritually unclean, certainly by all Levitical standards, and therefore is deemed an outcast and unworthy of society. And yet, here now comes the man, the healing prophet who she has heard all about, making his way through a crowd and appearing before her very eyes. And she refuses to accept what had been said to be her fate. She refuses to be turned away, to be stopped in her tracks like Naaman. She sees what needs to be done and lets nothing get in her way. She does not passively wait on Jesus to spot and approach her, no, rather she decides to make her own fate. And so she starts to push her way through the crowd, arm after arm, body after body, and then with a last, painful reach she extends with all that she has left and touches the hem of the Savior's garment. And immediately, not some long time thereafter, divine healing power is transferred from the incarnate into the invalid.

Now, my friends on Facebook, did you see that video circulating this week about that girl at CHOP who has had her cancer thrown into remission after doctors injected her with a strand of HIV? You all need to Google that this week.³ Here was a team of researchers, and indeed a family that refused to give up hope. Who pushed forward, who tried something new and brave; who did not stop at a closed door, who did not accept the inevitable. And for their unyielding efforts, they were rewarded and that clever, precious little girl is now living a happy, normal life.

In closing then let's review what we've learned this morning as we have apparently been all over the place: We've learned about the difficulties in my sermon writing schedule, about strokes (both real and metaphorical) lepers, magical garments, cancer, HIV, the decline in church attendance and hemorrhaging ladies. And perhaps not exactly in that order. Sounds absolutely crazy really, but hey you're the ones who ask me every 4.3 visitations just what goes into writing a sermon... So how can we tie all of this together, get our bathing suits on, and leave happily for summer?

Here it goes: 1) My sermon writing would be so much easier if I merely brainstormed, outlined and began writing on Tuesday when I'm already thinking about this stuff and putting the bulletin together; instead of stopping at the door like Naaman, waiting several days later for inspiration to re-find me, I need to push forward like the lady in the crowds and get things done when everything is ripe. Similarly, 2) I believe the future of our church and the Church at large would be so much brighter if we refused to remain so stubbornly anchored to traditions and ideals that too long ago went extinct. If we are but brave enough to move forward, circulating daring new ideas rather than coagulating and pooling at old tired notions, perhaps then we would be staring at an incline on the graph rather than the downward arrow.

And finally and most plainly, 3) come this fall our faith will bear more fruit, if we don't take too long of a break from it when we are away and travelling this summer. Look, I cannot wait for my vacations in August, or the mission trip to Belize in July. Nor can I wait to celebrate my mom's 65th in the Fingerlakes just two weeks from now. But I promise you this: on my nightstand will be my Greek and Hebrew textbooks, next to my NRSV for comparative studies. Now I can absolutely assure you I won't be looking at them daily. Not a rabbit's chance in you know where! Yes, even I need a break, just as you. But it won't last for too long or else I run the risk of it growing stale and being harder to get back into when classes and indeed our PCCH calendar kickoff again full-steam in September.

So will you join me then in the charge to remain close to the Word this summer? Not necessarily with 1st Thessalonians open at the tiki-bar, but perhaps a devotional sometime thereafter? Will you join me in remaining close to church, close to our search for God, even when bikini-laden beaches and morning mimosas beckon us otherwise? My friends, the more we keep at it, the more we move forward and continue to cultivate our faith, the harder it will be to ever reach a full stop – the greater our ingenuity and open determination, the easier it will be to push through the crowds and clots that ever block us from inspiration, healing, and Christ's passing presence.

Amen.

³ http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=h6Szi2ZfPd4#at=120