

A NOTE FOR PREACHERS on the form of this sermon manuscript:

Some preachers are able to preach without a manuscript. Others seem so tied to the page in front of them that they lose contact with their listeners. The classic example of this latter style is a young preacher whose submitted sermon video for his elder's ordination requirements showed him motioning vigorously with his arms and hands in the air all the while with his eyes glued to his manuscript. It might have been mistaken to be a SNL sketch.

I have preached with and without a manuscript, but in the later years of my ministry I nearly always preached from my manuscript. The reason is simple: I was not blessed with a photographic memory. When I tried to preach my manuscript from memory the flow and pace of my delivery was too frequently tentative and choppy as my mind was working on two levels simultaneously. On one level I was concentrating on the mechanics of my delivery: volume, inflection, pace, emphasis, essentially all the principles of oral interpretation. On another level my mind was working overtime trying to remember what came next and how did I phrase it to achieve its maximum impact.

I grew up listening to great manuscript preachers so I knew manuscript preaching could be theologically deep, emotionally engaging, and extremely well delivered. Over the years I experimented with various ways of writing my manuscript. I would often highlight the first word or two of each sentence so that when I returned my eyes to my manuscript, I could quickly find what came next. But even this did not break up a full page of text enough to allow a smooth delivery. I have seen other preachers' manuscripts that crammed 15-20 minutes of text onto two pages with $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{1}{2}$ inch margins. My eyes glaze over just trying to read that kind of manuscript, much less to preach from it. I learned that white space is a manuscript preacher's best friend. So, I began separating every sentence with a paragraph break, which broke up the solid wall of text on the page and made it much easier to preach more freely. When you have labored to write a well thought out and tightly edited manuscript, and have rehearsed it a few times, even reading it silently to yourself, often all you need is to glimpse the first phrase of a sentence to remember where you are going with it as you return your eyes toward the congregation.

Early in my first appointment I read a collection of Peter Marshall's prayers edited by his wife, Catherine. She explained his unique style of arranging words on a page, breaking up phrases and giving each one its own line on the page similar to a poetic style. I found this technique quite effective over the years and the sermon below uses this format.

I also most frequently printed my manuscript on a 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ by 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ half page and carried it into the pulpit or to the lectern in a same sized leather folio which gave it a smaller foot print. Often I would print it as a booklet, especially during a few periods when I made these booklets available to the congregation. In my last appointment the sound system was not very good, and I had a few people with impaired hearing, so I got in the habit of making my manuscript available before worship so they could follow along on the printed page and catch what their hearing may have missed.

Then, the last couple of years when iPads became quite useful, I actually wrote my sermon in Keynote (PowerPoint). I only put two to three sentences on each slide so it was easy to glance at the screen and see what to say. A simple touch of the screen advanced to the next slide seamlessly. I actually came to like this method the best. Unfortunately, I didn't override Apple's default storage of my Keynote files in the cloud and after I retired they somehow all disappeared. Fortunately, I do have video or audio copies of those messages which can be found at doncummins.com.

If you preach well without a manuscript, by all means continue to do so. Our preaching styles are like a pair of shoes. No one pair fits everybody. So preach in the style that you are best at using. My experience was that I preached better sermons that I worked diligently to write, paying attention to context, word choice, phrasing, movement, clear introductions and strong conclusions. And my delivery was better when I learned to preach freely from my manuscript.

An old preacher story tells of a preacher explaining his style of delivery to his denominational supervisor who came to monitor his preaching. He said that he wrote a manuscript for the first two-thirds of his sermon, but always depended on the holy Spirit to speak through him as he cut loose from his manuscript for the last third. His supervisor advised him, "Well I must say you do a better job than the Holy Spirit does so you should write 100 percent of your sermon."

One of my mentors in preaching was a manuscript preacher who shared his belief and experience that the Holy Spirit can engage and inspire the preacher as effectively in the study writing the sermon as in the pulpit preaching it. I would add that if the Holy Spirit hasn't engaged us in the writing of a sermon, we ought not to be preaching it any way.

There is an important creative discipline involved in developing effective writing skills, which in turn hone our communication skills. I found great freedom in the writing process. I would begin with a clear beginning but would often be surprised by the direction the Spirit would lead me into as the words and illustrations and biblical/life connections began to flow. I also learned to edit as I wrote. A well written manuscript can save us from unintended offense caused by using loaded words or phrases that may be a part of our stream of consciousness when speaking extemporaneously but we know better to weed out of a manuscript into which they may have surreptitiously crept. Careful attention to all these things in the writing process can produce a first draft that is pretty effectively finished. Of course, using Microsoft Word or Apple Pages makes the writing process so much more effective.

One final thought: after crafting effective sermon manuscripts, why not extend the reach of your sermons by publishing them at least to the congregation. One never knows who may take a copy or with whom they may share it and the good it may do in someone's life. So, write, preach, publish!

“The Gift of a Name”
A Sermon by Don Cummings
Exodus 33:12-23

There is a lot to consider in today’s lection from Exodus.

- God has readied the people to leave Mt. Sinai for the land he promised to Abraham.
- Moses tells God, if you aren’t going with us, we ain’t going nowhere!
- Moses tells God that his going with them is in fact what will make the people of Israel distinct from all the other people of the world.
- Moses asks God, “Show me your glory.”
- God warns Moses no human being can see the face of God and live, so he hides Moses in the cleft of a rock and allows Moses to see his back as he passes by, and the trail of his glory.

All of these aspects of this passage are very significant,
but I want to focus on just one phrase in this passage from Exodus 33.

It is a phrase of just five words.
A phrase that was revolutionary in Moses’ day
and is still revolutionary in our day

It occurs twice in the passage.
Once Moses quotes God as saying it,
and once God says it himself.
Did you catch it?

“I know you by name.”

This is huge.

You see, in Moses’ day, religion was impersonal.
The ancient pantheon of Egyptian gods
didn’t give a flip for the Egyptians.
All ancient religions across the middle east
began with the presumption
that the gods were perpetually angry with human beings.

The whole pagan system of religion
 was focused on making sacrifices to the gods
 to appease their anger, and persuade them to act for the benefit of humanity.
Each god was in charge of a different force of nature.
There was a god for fertility
There was a god for the harvest
There was a god for wine
There was a god for war
There was a god for life
There was a god for rain
And on and on.

It was almost impossible
 to get the gods to do anything for the good of the people
 because the gods couldn't have cared less about humanity.

God had sent Moses into this rats nest of false gods to do his bidding—
 to proclaim to Pharaoh, “The Lord says, ‘Let my people go’”.

Now a quick review of biblical history:

We have creation.

We have the fall.

We have a long period of time when humankind lives in utter separation from God.

Then God calls Abraham

 and introduces the revolutionary concept
 that the Creator God desires a relationship
 with fallen human beings and

 God calls Abraham into a covenant relationship with himself.

Then comes famine in Canaan

 and Abraham's descendants move to Egypt in order to survive,
 and that's a whole 'nother story in itself.

Then Pharaoh enslaves the people

 and in their groaning, they call out to their God for help

And God stretches forth his right hand

 to reveal that not only is he the God of the covenant with Abraham,
 but that he is the God who keeps his covenant promises.

So, one day as Moses is herding his sheep,

 God catches Moses' attention with a burning bush
 in order to get a meeting with him, and
 tells Moses to go back into Egypt
 to lead God's people out of slavery.

Then after a prolonged conversation at the bush

 during which Moses trots out every excuse in the book
 for why he is not the guy for the job,
 God basically says, “Ah, Moses, just shut up and go.”

And in one final ploy, Moses says, And “Whom shall I say sent me?”

Now this was a highly significant question.

In the ancient world, if a priest or a prophet or some other kind of seer
claimed to speak for a god,
his or her message had no authenticity
unless he could say which god commanded him to speak on its behalf.

So Moses, realizing he was being sent to confront the deistic bureaucracy
of the Kingdom of Egypt, says
“And whom shall I say sent me?”
Who gives me the authority to speak on his behalf?
How will Pharaoh know my message is authenticated?

And in a huge development in the biblical story,
God, in his unfolding revelation of himself to humankind,
for the first time reveals his name:
“I am who I am.”

God has a name!

No longer just the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
no longer just the God of our ancestors,
no longer like all the other gods of the ancient world, in other words,
who were all gods of the ancestors,
but the great “*I am who I am.*”

That was huge! It was just huge.

Now, at first hearing, this sounds like a strange kind of a name for a God.

But God’s very name proclaims
“I am self-determining.
No one else created me.
No one else was before me.
No one else is more powerful than I.
I am who I am.”

Now, back to today’s lection from Exodus 33.

God has delivered the people of Israel out of slavery.
Moses has led them to Mt. Sinai where God gave them the Ten Commandments.
And now as the people of Israel prepare to leave Sinai for the Promised Land,
God says to Moses,
“I know you by name.”

This, too, was huge.

You see, now it's personal.
We have an almighty creator God, with a name,
addressing a mere mortal
whose name he knows.

And this against the backdrop
of a bunch raving pagan gods
who don't give a darn about human beings.

This introduces a theme
that becomes deeply imbedded
throughout the rest of the biblical story.

The prophets speak for this God to his people.
The psalmists speak with God person to person.
The people of Israel, wayward as they are,
seek the presence of this God
who has loved them and redeemed them.

Because now it's personal.

And Jesus added one more highly significant layer to all of this.
In John's gospel, when Jesus gathered with his disciples
the night before his crucifixion,
he said to them,

“I no longer call you servants,
because a servant does not know his master's business.
Instead, I have called you friends,
for everything that I learned from my Father
I have made known to you.”

“I have called you friend.”

Ah, the importance of being given a name.

We know that names have the power to shape a person's sense of identity—
their very personality.

There's a whole universe of difference
between calling one's spouse,
“My beloved, and scoundrel”
Or between a father calling his daughter
“My princess or, as one father I once knew told me he called his daughter,

“My little . . .” and then he used a street name for a woman of the night.
Or between a teacher calling a student,
“brilliant, genius” and “dunce.”

In seeking to shape us and give us our sense of identity,
to put his stamp on our personality,
God has called us “Friend.”

There is a contemporary Christian song
that captures the power of the gift of that name, Friend.

It goes like this:

Who am I that You are mindful of me
That You hear me when I call
Is it true that You are thinking of me
How You love me it's amazing

(Chorus)

I am a friend of God
I am a friend of God
I am a friend of God

Now that could sound really braggadocios and egotistical.
I mean who in his right mind would go around telling people,
“Hey, I’m a friend of God.
Did you know that I am a friend of God?
Have I told you lately that I am friend of God.
Or worse yet, “Hey you need a favor?
Well, I’m a friend of God, I can get one for you.”

No, no, as the song continues
we learn why saying “I am a friend of God”
is neither bragging
nor an egoistic self-proclamation:

I am a friend of God, the song goes,
I am a friend of God
I am a friend of God

He calls me friend

God Almighty, Lord of Glory
You have called me friend

He calls me friend

He calls me friend...

The gift of a name—friend.
That changes everything.

You never know
when your status as a friend of God
will come into play.

We will seldom go around announcing “Hey, I am a friend of God.”
In fact maybe never.
But we need always to *behave* as a friend of God.

When we feed the hungry,
we are behaving as a friend of God
When we clothe the naked,
we are behaving as a friend of God
When we sew quilts for wounded soldiers,
we are behaving as a friend of God
When we pick up hammer or saw and help build a Habitat for Humanity home,
we are behaving as a friend of God
When we work for that which is good and just,
we are behaving as a friend of God
When we care for God’s property, the church and its grounds,
we are behaving as a friend of God
When we love our children and raise them in the way they should go,
we are behaving as a friend of God
When we manage our treasure as God instructs by returning a tithe to him,
we are behaving as a friend of God
When we pray for others and for the redemption of the world,
we are behaving as a friend of God

The world needs a lot people behaving as friends of God
to make it a better place—a kingdom of God kind of place.

And yes, there may be, on rare occasions,
a need to tell someone with our words
that we are a friend of God.

Many years ago, I received a call from a parishioner
with the sad news that a young single mother in our congregation
had been broadsided by another driver as she crossed an intersection.
The mother escaped serious injury,

but her one-year old baby girl had been critically hurt.
The baby was in the intensive care unit.
The caller asked if I could visit them in the hospital.

As I stood beside the little girl's basinet in the intensive care unit
I saw her wrists were strapped
so she couldn't pull at the tubes and wires connected to her.
What words did I have to say to a one-year old little girl who was afraid
and couldn't understand what was happening to her.

I have learned that at such times,
God often gives me what to say.
I leaned over her basinet,
put my mouth close to her ear, and I said,
Tanesha, I am a friend of God
and he has sent me to tell you
that he loves you
and that he is holding you in his tender care.
And then I prayed for her.

In the latter years of my ministry,
I began closing the baptismal service
by whispering in the ear of the baby I had just baptized
a quote from Isaiah.
I wanted some of the first words a child hears to be these:

Don't be afraid, I have redeemed you.
I've called your name. You are mine.
When you're in over your head,
I'll be there with you.
When you're in rough waters,
You will not go down.
When you're between a rock and a hard place,
It won't be a dead end—
Because I am your God,
Your personal God . . .
Your savior. (Isaiah 43:1-3)

You see, it *is* personal.
God knows *you* by name.
God calls *you* friend.

The gift of a name.
It changes everything.

Will you pray with me?

Creator God,
Redeemer of Israel,
Lover of all humankind,
You have called us "Friend."
And you have invited us to your own table
 so that we may be a part of your unfolding kingdom.
Make us worthy, not by our merit, but by your grace,
 to behave as your friends
 both at your table
 and in the world around us.
And all God's friends said, Amen.