

Preaching in Ordinary Time Doesn't Have to be 'Ordinary'

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According to Merriam-Webster, *ordinary* means “to be expected,” “usual,” or “of a common kind.” In everyday speech, we often use the word to describe something that is neither exceptionally good nor exceptionally bad — “ordinary” means simply average, routine, or “just okay.”

But in the liturgical calendar, Ordinary Time means something quite different. The word comes from “ordinal,” as in numbers arranged in sequence. During these Sundays, instead of selecting scripture passages specifically for liturgical feasts, the Church journeys through Scripture in an ordered way.

The introductory notes in the Lectionary remind us that these readings are carefully paired. The First Reading and the Gospel are linked in one of three ways: complementary, foretelling, or supplemental. The Psalm responds to the First Reading and, by nature, also creates a bridge to the Gospel reading. What may seem ordinary is actually extraordinarily interconnected.

The challenge for many preachers, however, is that these readings can feel over-familiar. So, one way to handle this overfamiliarity in the Ordinary Season is not to change the message, but to change the form through which that message is proclaimed. That will help to keep your preaching fresh. How do we do that?

Before experimenting with new forms, it helps to recognize our usual sermonic patterns. Do we begin with a thesis statement (what we are going to say) and then develop supporting points? That is called deductive preaching. Or do we gradually build the case and arrive at a strong conclusion only toward the end? That is called inductive preaching.

Dr. Thomas G. Long, in *The Witness of Preaching*, chapters five and six,¹ describes several common homily forms. He encourages preachers to think intentionally about their homiletic structure as integral to the proclamation itself. *How you say it* matters as much as *what you have to say*. And being creative with structure (while keeping your same kerygma and focal point) can be invigorating to your preaching life.²

One possible way to structure a message is the first-person narrative (FPN). This form can bring freshness and creativity to familiar texts, but it must be carefully constructed not to lose the focal point. Listeners should not spend one-third of the homily confused before finally realizing what the preacher is attempting to do. Clarity and purpose are essential.

¹ Long, Thomas G. *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd edition, Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 2005.

² *Ibid.*, p. 169-171.

FPN preaching can arise from Ignatian *lectio divina*, the putting of oneself into the biblical story through prayer. Then the homily is composed through this sacred imagination in various ways: by pretending to preach from the perspective of a biblical character; or the narrator can become a reporter, narrating the story from an outsider perspective. You could create a dialogue between the characters in which you take part.³ An overlooked character can come alive. This form, like any form, should not be overused. But try it once or twice in the doldrums of the ordinary time of summer to keep your creativity muscles strong.

Another option is the sustained narrative, in which the story itself becomes the preaching event. Rather than explaining the message after the story, the narrative carries the proclamation, often inductively. This approach can be powerful, though it presents similar challenges to first-person narrative: listeners must remain engaged from the beginning and oriented throughout the journey.

Ordinary Time can be the perfect season to experiment with new forms. Since the readings unfold week by week, they offer preachers an opportunity not only to revisit familiar texts but also to renew how those texts are heard. “Ordinary” does not have to mean average, routine, or “just okay.” Listeners (especially younger ones) will wake up and say, “hmmm, this is new!”

Here, below, is my own example of a reflection that is structured with sustained narrative preaching. As I prayed with the Isaiah 58 reading, the image of “dawn” evoked an early morning scene from the homeless shelter. Notice how the focus statement comes in the last three paragraphs; that also makes it a model of inductive preaching structure.

Isaiah 58:7–10 Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Light that Breaks Forth

The church hall was cold that morning.
Folding tables. Fluorescent lights. A pot of soup that hadn’t quite warmed yet.
No banners. No choir. No sense that anything holy was about to happen.

Outside, the neighborhood was still gray—
people wrapped in coats, shoulders hunched, eyes down.
Hunger does that. So does loneliness.

Inside, a woman took off her scarf and wrapped it around a man who hadn’t asked for it.
Someone else ladled soup a little fuller than planned.
A teenager sat down—not to serve, just to listen.

³ An effective first-person narrative preacher is Dr. Ann Garrido. An example can be found at <https://word.op.org/2020/08/02/24040/>

Nothing dramatic.
No thunder.
No voice from heaven.

And then—almost without anyone noticing—
the room grew warmer.

Not because the heat kicked on,
but because names were learned.
Because bread was broken.
Because someone stopped passing by and stayed.

Isaiah says, “*Then your light shall break forth like the dawn.*”
Not like a lightning bolt.
Like the dawn.

First, enough light to see a face.
Then enough light to see a need.
Then enough light to see yourself differently.

By the time the soup pot was empty,
the room was bright—not with chandeliers,
but with presence.

That is the promise of this reading:
When you loosen the bonds,
share the bread,
welcome the vulnerable—
light does not have to be summoned.

It comes.
Quietly.
Faithfully.

And what once felt like a dim, forgotten place
becomes—almost without warning—
the place where God chooses to dawn.