

Bring some “sense” to your homily

Put flesh on your text by using more tactile imagery

On the list of consultants used by preachers, theologians occupy the top slots. But what about chiropractors? Or dance instructors?

Theological concepts notwithstanding, the body of a sacred text usually includes one or more “bodies,” those cumbersome, physical compositions of chemicals, muscle, and bone that are prone to aches and pains, bruises and sunburns. Because conversion of the heart requires more than consent of the mind, getting the whole body involved in analyzing a piece of Scripture helps the preaching process succeed.

So, in addition to historical and literary issues, questions of a physical nature also apply, for example: How much did those jugs at Cana weigh? How tiring might be “a Sabbath day’s walk”? What’s the sound of water sliding off a foot and into a clay basin?

Sensory elements embedded inside a passage provide excellent opportunities for preachers to engage their listeners on a visceral level:

Sore feet on the desert sojourn mirror the strain in the legs of protesters at City Hall.

The “reed swaying in the wind” recalls a farmer’s need for rain in a time of drought.

Thomas’ probing of Jesus’ scarred hand conditions a communicant’s open palm to receive the Body of Christ.

Sensory properties also provide a preacher with a homiletic “pitching mound,” a heightened place from which to aim their words at a wide range of targets, as seen in this homily excerpt:

Ask Moses how his arms felt the day he propped them on the shoulders of Aaron and Hur to keep his petition lifted to God. He’ll tell you that prayer makes your neck stiff, your back hurt, and your arms ache...like a pulled hamstring.

Like an athlete doing chin-ups, a grocer stacking shelves, a painter rolling a brush, or a fifth-grader stretching her arm to answer a question in social studies class, prayer entails effort, persistence, and heavy lifting.

We know about the Praying Hands, but what about the praying *arms*?

Appeals to the sensory dimensions of human experience place the preacher in the company of the characters in the story. The gospel writers themselves make frequent use of such elements in their narratives: They note the insufficiency of chains to restrain the cave-dwelling Gerasene demoniac, Jesus’ anguished groan at the extent of a man’s deformity, the sweat that fell like drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane.

In her book, *The Cloister Walk*, poet Kathleen Norris, notes the essential role of “the sounds of words and the silence of images” in cultivating poetic knowledge.

To feel God’s word like fire in the belly, to drink of the Spirit like water from a stream, to feel Earth’s potency in a handful of wheat—these are but a sampling of the sensory delights that await preachers charged with the task of enlivening the words of the gospel and clothing them in flesh.