

Devotion, Week of August 27, 2023

Rev. Jeanne Simpson

This may surprise you a little. I didn't really learn how to preach in seminary. I learned to preach when I served my ministerial internship in a suburban Presbyterian church near Cape Town, South Africa. The minister there, Peter Langermann, guided me through exegesis (analysis) of a text and the formation of a sermon about it. He used an Afrikaans term, "wendel in der werde," which means "wandering in the Word." He told me to read the Scripture first, and then let it sit with me a little before reading any commentaries. Then to read the commentaries, form a draft sermon, and then let that sit with me a little. This concept of sitting with the Word is intended to help me explore its meaning to me today, so that I can impart some understanding of it to the congregation.

That lesson has taught me well over the last 11 years of ministry. I follow those guidelines. But after I draft a sermon, I have a powerful mentor who helps me bring it to a final state – an editor. And who is that editor? My dear and faithful husband Jim, who has dedicated himself to reading those sermons all these years and giving me honest, clear feedback. Jim approaches my sermon, not as a theologian, but as a regular congregant in the pew, and he tries to make sure that he understands my message. It's probably his background as a federal official who frequently reviewed regulations and wrote interpretations of them for states, but he instinctively knows the pattern of how a sermon should proceed. First with a review of the text, its background and context, and an explanation of unfamiliar terms, like "Nazirite," that we've discussed lately with Samson and Saul and Samuel. And then he knows that after I discuss the text, I must apply it to today's world. What does it mean right now, for all of us in the church? And how does this text make us want to live differently, in God's kingdom here on earth?

He's incredibly thoughtful and good. I struggled with my sermon for this past Sunday about Hannah and Samuel, and he struggled along with me. We discussed the sermon three different times, letting the Word wander within us. And as usual, when I incorporated his suggestions, the sermon suddenly came to life. There was no more wandering with the Word – there was truth telling and meaning now in the Word. I thank God for the blessing of this fine mentor and husband every day, who helps me bring you better sermons every week. So if you like one of my sermons, thank him also!!

Jeanne