



Preaching the gospel for all ages

What it looks like and how to get started



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Let me take you to 1990s Canada. Ten-year-old me is watching television when a commercial for a new breakfast cereal appears on the screen. An older Scottish man and his adult son are arguing about Oatmeal Crisp. This new cereal, the son declares, is delicious. But the father ardently believes that it doesn't possess the qualities that allow it to be called oatmeal. In the end, the two agree that 'It's a bonny cereal' before exclaiming directly to the camera, 'but it's not oatmeal!'

Fast forward a few decades and that 10-year-old boy is now an adult presenting about intergenerational approaches to preaching at a conference for clergy and lay leaders. He shares about different ways that the gospel can be proclaimed in worship services so that people of all ages can engage with the message together. During the Q&A session, a member of the audience remarks that a lot of what was shared is applicable for religious education classes, but they have trouble seeing how some approaches to intergenerational preaching, especially those that don't look like a 20-minute monologue, really count as preaching. In a manner reminiscent of that Oatmeal Crisp advertisement, the person says 'They are good practices. But they aren't sermons.'

Preaching matters. From Jesus' ministry and the first days of the Church, proclaiming the gospel – the good news of the coming of God's realm (Mark 1:14-15) – has had a pivotal place in the life of the Church. Through preaching, God's story is shared, listeners are invited to transformation and the loving presence of God is revealed.

Preaching has the power to share, invite and reveal. And, yet, it is often carried out in ways that marginalise. For too long and in too many instances, the monological sermon (what Doug Pagitt calls 'speaching') has been offered *by* adults and *for* adults. Often younger people leave worship services before the preaching slot so that they can engage in activities more appropriate for them – but this usually confirms that the preaching slot is only for adults!

What would happen if preaching was reimagined as a liturgical event for everyone, something that was truly 'the work of the whole people of God' (the meaning of the root word for liturgy), no matter one's age? What if we widened our view of preaching and saw the monological sermon as just one of a plethora of ways to proclaim the good news of God?

Beyond the sermon

Broadening one's perspective of preaching beyond sermons is vital for understanding and experimenting with intergenerational approaches to the craft. I find it helpful to imagine three concentric circles². The largest circle is *proclamation*. This is an overarching term for everything we do as followers of Jesus to share the good news, from a conversation over cups of coffee to serving meals at a soup kitchen, an RE lesson at a school, or a homily during a church service. The middle circle is labelled *preaching*. Preaching certainly counts as proclamation, but I use the term to refer to all the ways that the gospel is proclaimed as part of the liturgical life of the church, that is, in religious services at local churches, camps, schools, and wherever else Christians gather to worship God. The innermost circle represents *sermons and homilies*. These are simply a couple of forms that the preaching ministry of the church might take, albeit the most common and tenacious.

Let's go back to that Oatmeal Crisp-inspired question following my presentation. The questioner was quite astute in naming the fact that some forms of intergenerational preaching aren't sermons (while others definitely are). But they do fall within that middle circle that we've labelled *preaching*. There's no question that, whether forms of preaching for all ages look like sermons or not, they're ways of proclaiming the gospel within the liturgical life of Christian communities.

¹ Doug Pagitt, *Preaching in the Inventive Age* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014).

² These definitions are drawn from O. Wesley Allen, *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

“Focus on a point of departure, find allies, fail gloriously, and fly high.”

What does intergenerational preaching look like?

As you might have guessed by now, intergenerational preaching can take all sorts of shapes and forms. In fact, six contributors to my book *A Gospel for All Ages* show how diverse all-age preaching can be as they describe their approaches.

Some preachers convene intergenerational small groups to *interpret* the gospel together. Talashia Keim Yoder organises mid-week conversation groups before she preaches so she can listen closely to what children, adolescents and adults share about a passage of Scripture. She then crafts a sermon based on their ideas. Murray Wilkinson begins the preaching moment during all-age worship services with a very short message that sets up a theme and leads toward a question. He then invites listeners to respond to that question by discussing it with those around them.

“Other styles of preaching bring the generations together by encouraging people of all ages to speak the gospel with one another.”

At Karen DeBoer’s church, congregants are invited to share stories of faith as part of their worship services. With due notice, people of different ages might come to the front of the church and offer a story about how God has been present in their lives lately. This could happen alongside a sermon, as a part of a sermon, or even in lieu of a sermon. Amy Casteel breaks worship services into three or four blocks, each following a common rhythm of prepare, teach, respond. During a prepare moment, for example, a child might be interviewed as they imagine themselves to be a character in a Biblical story. Amy might then teach by offering a very short (2-3 minutes) reflection on the ideas that surfaced during the interview. The whole community could respond by drawing pictures that they will combine into a large mural. This entire pattern might only take 15 minutes, so it could be repeated three or four times, with a different interviewee, a different reflection and different elements added to one’s drawing with each iteration.

Experiential approaches can be the most difficult to describe because they might not look anything like traditional sermons or homilies. Tammy Preston uses the creative arts to draw participants into the process. Whether asking people to wander around the room looking at different names for God, leading discussions about patterns in Scripture, or providing materials for people to weave bracelets, preaching for her is a collaborative experience of co-creation. Jim Keat transforms what is often called the children’s sermon into a participatory experience for everyone – a ‘message for all ages’ as he calls it. He considers core ideas that lie within a piece of Scripture and then seeks ways for everyone to experience the heart of one of those ideas. This may involve everyone literally exercising their muscles as they metaphorically build up the muscle of faith. Or he might invite children to share about what love looks like in order for the community to live into the reality that the kingdom of God belongs to those young ones (Luke 18:16).



“There are others who preach by inviting the gathered community to experience the gospel together.”

Preaching in all-age contexts is an experimental practice. Those mentioned above, all of whom outline their preaching approaches in greater detail in *A Gospel for All Ages*, were not trained in how to preach intergenerationally. They simply started trying things out. Along the way, they found small ways to begin adapting their church’s preaching practices, they enlisted people to support them, they made all sort of blunders (and learned from them), and they celebrated when the winds of the Spirit blew and everything seemed to work out better than they could have imagined. I call these the four F-words of change: *focus* on a point of departure, *find* allies, *fail* gloriously, and *fly* high.

Whether you’ve been an ordained preacher for 30 years or you’re a layperson who’s only recently become interested in faith formation, you can preach for all ages – you too can focus, find, fail, and fly as you experiment with intergenerational preaching.

Find out more

- Read Dave’s book *A Gospel for All Ages: Teaching and Preaching with the Whole Church* (Fortress Press, 2022).
- Watch a recording of a web event about the book (faith-forward.net/Gospel-for-all-ages) or by visiting Dave’s website (davecsinos.com).
- Listen to Melanie Cave interview Dave Csinos on this topic on the Roots for Churches Podcast: www.rootsforchurches.podbean.com