

## From the Pastor

Dear ones,

Do you have a process? In your work or hobbies, is there an order you follow that helps you arrive at the preferred result? Often it is the process that gifts depth and meaning to the act of creating.

That question can be asked of anyone who creates. We can easily forget that artwork doesn't magically appear— even AI images like the ones that will be featured on the bulletins for the Sundays in Lent. There was a process involved in producing them. To get a result I like, I have to develop a concept and then describe what I hope the image will convey. For instance, to generate the image for the 1st Sunday in Lent, I uploaded the smaller, old piece of art and input the following prompt, "Perhaps you could reimagine this as more abstract and angular like stained glass."

Have you ever wondered how a pastor comes up with what she is going to say?

In a rather weird experience, after using it to edit something, I found myself "talking" with ChatGPT about my group of clergy mentees. For some reason it began asking me questions about how I work, how I prepare to preach. It asked me questions and I answered them. Type, click, question, respond, and then out of the blue it asked me a question that surprised me: "Would you like for me to create a document describing your process so that you can share it with your mentees?"

After the initial shock wore off, I said "yes." And it did. The program analyzed every answer I had given and created a document entitled *From Reading to Proclaiming: A Practical Flow for Sermon Preparation* (A guide for preachers who want their sermons to breathe—rooted in Scripture, informed by study, and alive with the Spirit).

I was stunned.

My experience is that preachers all prepare a bit differently. There is no "one size fits all" approach. I enjoy occasionally translating some or all of the text from which I am preaching, others do not. I enjoy reading and handwriting notes while others avoid commentaries altogether. I hope that it is true that there is a process we all follow that allows the sermon to unfold under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Below is the description of my process that ChatGPT prepared for my mentees. I hope it will be interesting for you to know how I work.

### 1. Begin with Prayerful Reading

Before anything else, ask God to open your heart and imagination. Read the passage aloud slowly, more than once if possible. Pay attention to what stirs you: a word, an image, a feeling of discomfort, hope, or confusion. Don't rush to interpret; simply notice what stands out. "What is this text doing to me before I do anything to it?"

### 2. Mark What You Notice

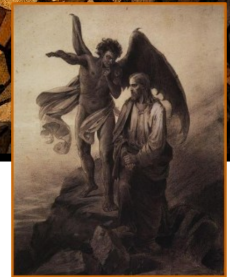
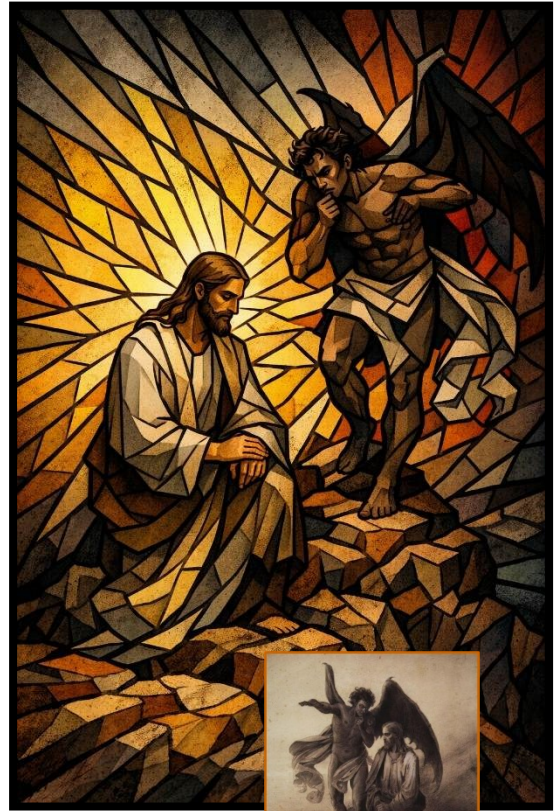
Write what you find interesting, troubling, or encouraging. Underline repeated words or phrases. Note tensions in the text—where God seems to surprise, reverse, or challenge expectations. Write freely; don't worry about order or polish. This becomes your raw material, your first conversation with the Word.

### 3. Listen for Personal Resonance

Ask: "Where does this speak into my own life right now?" What questions does it raise about your own discipleship? What does your heart need to hear in this text before your congregation does?

### 4. Study to Deepen, Not to Drown

Now bring in commentaries, word studies, or background sources. Look for historical or cultural insights that clarify what's happening. Find theological angles that affirm or challenge your initial impressions. Copy or highlight what feels alive—not just what sounds clever. Study is meant to deepen the encounter, not replace it.



## 5. Discern the Core Message

Step back and ask: “If this passage had one thing to say to my people this week, what would it be?” Look for verbs: What is God saying, doing, calling, promising, or warning? Boil that down into a single sentence. That becomes your sermon seed—everything else grows from it.

## 6. Shape the Flow

Arrange your thoughts around a natural movement:

1. Human condition or question. 2. God’s response in the text. 3. Invitation to transformation.

Add stories, examples, or humor that make the message recognizable in everyday life. Don’t worry about perfect wording yet—get the movement right first.

## 7. Write to Clarify, Not to Confine

Draft a manuscript or detailed notes so you can see your own thought flow clearly. Use it to test transitions, phrasing, and timing. But remember that you will preach through it, not from it. It’s a guide for clarity, not a cage for the Spirit.

## 8. Rehearse with Imagination

Read your sermon aloud while picturing your congregation—their faces, needs, and joys. Listen for where the Spirit’s nudge. Mark key phrases in bold or line breaks for natural eye contact. Let the manuscript become familiar enough that you could set it down and still tell the story.

## 9. Trust the Moment

On Sunday, bring all of it—study, prayer, notes, manuscript—and then release it. Preach with gratitude for what God has already shown you in the preparation. Remember: the sermon is not something you deliver; it’s something the Holy Spirit does through you.

## 10. Reflect and Give Thanks

After preaching, think on what felt alive, what seemed to connect, and what you learned. Thank God for the Word that spoke again—through you and to you. That reflection becomes the seed of next week’s sermon.

“Study the Word until it begins to study you. Preach the sermon until it begins to preach you. Then step aside and let the Word do its work.”

While this is not something I keep in front of me every week, I found that it was quite accurate in describing the stages of development that I go through before I stand before you in worship. I have not yet actually shared this with my mentees, but I am supposed to show them how I prepare at our next meeting in March. That is what prompted me to wonder if this would be meaningful for you to know.

## Remember Christ!

*FRANK DAVID*