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FOREWORD

Once, when asked about writing, Saul Bellow said, “Well, I don’t know exactly how it’s done. I let it alone a good deal.”

That’s how I feel about preaching. I learned to preach by preaching. I let alone the theory behind it all. I learned what worked and what didn’t by giving altar calls that brought no one to the altar, and more times than I care to remember watching people’s eyes glaze over while I preached. The tradecraft of public speaking I learned by preaching revivals to crowds of thirty people (or less), revivals that started on Sunday night and went without break until the next Sunday night (with Sunday morning thrown in), then started up again the next Monday or Tuesday and went again until Sunday. They were long weeks if you “didn’t connect.” I learned to preach pastorally when I became a pastor and how to preach

conferences and camps when I began to be asked to preach in those types of meetings.

I did not always understand the whys for things that I just knew to be so. Rhythm, cadence, and gauging the emotional impact of sermon points in order to find the most effective way of presenting them, along with a hundred other important things, were all more intuition than training. It was the theory I was lacking.

Then I began to be asked to teach sessions on preaching to aspiring preachers. For five years I taught a semester-long class on preaching at Gateway College of Evangelism. I discovered that people weren't really content to know that something is true just because I said it was. While they respected my experience, they wanted to know why it was so. I began to think about the mechanics of preaching. I wanted to discover why some things work and some don't. I also began researching what other preachers had to say about this calling and craft.

Now, I have written this book. In some ways it has been a joy, in others it has been a real challenge, one that has taken far too long to complete (just ask the editor). Part of the struggle is that I am still very much just a student of this fascinating collaboration between God and human beings, and suspect I always will be. But mainly, it is that the task of putting something you have learned by doing into not just words, but understandable and thus teachable words, has been a years-long commitment.

Now it's done, and I sure hope it helps somebody.

PROLOGUE

We cannot be certain where the valley of dry bones was located, or what calamity had filled it with piles of human remains. Was this the site of some battle, and the bones the mingled remains of men who had once fought here? Or was it the place where the ill-fated migration of an entire tribe came to an end? We are given none of the details of how the bones came to be in this place. Maybe the message is that it doesn't matter: men and women arrive at the graveyards of their hopes by any number of pathways.

Into this scene of ruin and despair, God called a man, a human being, who by his own confession didn't have the answer to this dilemma of death. "Can these bones live?" was the question God asked this preacher. "Thou knowest," was the honest answer. Every preacher has been where this

preacher was, called to a place in which he or she simply wasn't sure if anything could live.

"Can they live?" He looked over the valley full of scattered bones, nothing moving, the moan of the wind through empty ribcages the only sound. "Thou knowest," was the only possible answer.

Then came the directive, "Preach to them." It was a command and a promise all at once.

The command should not have been unexpected. After all, he was called to preach; it was his life's mission. Preaching is what preachers do. So he preached. "Oh, dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!" His words echoed across the silent valley as he preached to the dead. Probably at first there was no response; had a traveler happened to pass by he surely would have thought the preacher crazy. *Nobody is listening, nobody is responding.*

Then the impossible happens: there is movement in the valley. Of their own accord, bones begin to move almost as if by an invisible hand. Not randomly, but purposefully, the bones skitter across the desert floor, their mission at first a mystery, but soon plain enough: they are seeking their place, joining with bones from their former lives. Skeletons begin to take shape. Order is emerging from chaos: fingers to hands, hands to wrists, skulls to spines, until—under the power of preaching—lying across the desert are the outlines of human beings. Now sinew and flesh begin to appear, muscle and skin form over the bones until men are recognizable, until it seems they are almost alive.

Now the preacher falls silent. A miracle has occurred, the evidence lying at his feet, filling the valley floor. But

what now? His preaching has effected a transformation beyond imagining, what power can now bring these to the next level? What can put breath into these lungs, life into these bodies?

“Preach to the wind!” comes the command.

With less hesitation and more anticipation, the preaching begins again: “Come from the four winds, oh breath, and enter into them!” And the breath comes, and those once dead, are made alive, and they rise to their feet. And where once there was only the stillness of death, now there is a mighty army, alive, strong, and ready to march.

Preaching still accomplishes miracles. Only preaching empowers a human being with one hand to reach into the world of human need and with the other into the world of divine power, and to pull those two worlds together.

This book is about this unique partnership between the human and the divine. It is not only a how-to book, although I hope you will find instruction and some down-to-earth help to improve your preaching, but it is more than that. It will explore the deeper and broader aspects of this incredible calling. We will not spend much time exploring the various types of preaching, evangelistic, homiletic, expository, and so forth, but will focus instead on techniques and principles that will improve your mastery of any type of preaching. We will linger on the three ingredients of persuasive public speaking, which are absolutely vital to understanding the human side of preaching. In doing so we will discuss these timeless principles in an era which prides itself in abandoning such principles, but is poor in offering anything to take their place.

PART ONE

WE PREACH

For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach . . .

Paul

No matter what our station, daily life in a fallen world is a walk through a gauntlet of belittlement. Those who attend our churches are daily bombarded by false values and beliefs that cheapen God's creation, by personal slights and insults, by Satan's accusations. Their minds are assaulted by scabrous images in the media and by profanity that is objectionable to God precisely because it debases the creation. They are subject to sins that mar God's

image within them. They suffer distorted images of themselves that distort God's truth.

After such a week, it's a wonder that a person can walk into church with any sense of worth. . . .

But then they hear anointed preaching, and gravity reverses as people sense the upward pull of heaven. The sermon reveals the character of God, who infuses all life with meaning and majesty. The sermon tells who we are in God's sight: created in the divine image, beloved beyond description, destined for glory. The sermon uncovers sins—then announces how to be redeemed. The sermon honors the morality that exalts humankind. The sermon assumes that people can think and discern about life and the Book of Life. The sermon appeals to the will, treating people as responsible agents whose choices matter forever. The sermon preaches Christ Immanuel, forever hallowing human flesh, second Adam who will one day resurrect believers in his likeness. A sermon is the most intense dose of dignity any person can receive.

Craig Bryan Larson

Before we get into how to preach better, let's talk about some of the fundamentals: What, exactly, is preaching? Why do we do preaching the way we do? Is preaching as we do it biblical, or is it just tradition? Does preaching have anything to do with salvation, or is it just one of those things we do to fill out a church service, no different from congregational singing, receiving an offering, or having a choir? It is important to answer these questions in order to know the value of this remarkable event.