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# Scripture by Heart: Learning and Performing Biblical Passages for Worship: A Brief Tutorial

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This brief tutorial offers ideas for the process of presenting biblical passages by memory in worship. The following reflections address the basis for presenting scripture by heart, how to learn a passage, how to perform it, and what the impact might be for worshipping communities.<sup>1</sup>

## *What is the purpose of this tutorial?*

The purpose of this tutorial is to give some instruction in learning a passage of scripture by heart in order to present it in worship in a lively and meaningful way.

## *What are the limitations of this effort?*

In teaching classes, I do a lot of hands-on coaching in which I give suggestions for performing and then offer direct constructive feedback to the student efforts. Also, in classes, I can illustrate with my own performances what students should consider. There is no substitute for the personal interaction in those classrooms. Nevertheless, by reading this tutorial, you may be able to pick up some ideas and try what works for you.

## *What is the approach of this tutorial?*

There are excellent storytelling workshops available from folks who have been doing this for a long time—descriptions, video workshops, and the offering of live workshops. Many of these you will find at the site for the Network of Biblical Storytellers at [www.nbsint.org](http://www.nbsint.org). Tom Boomershine has a website [www.gotell.org](http://www.gotell.org) where you can get instruction on learning scripture for worship. There are also examples of lectors telling scripture in worship on YouTube. The approach here will parallel many of these offerings. The distinctiveness of the approach here is to encourage word-for-word memorization of a passage.

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1. For over thirty years, David Rhoads memorized and performed scriptural selections of New Testament writings: Mark, Galatians, Philemon, 1 Peter, James, Revelation, the Sermon on the Mount, and selections from Luke and John. In many of the regular classes he taught at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, he invited students to memorize and perform passages as a way to experience and interpret scripture. For ten years, he taught Scripture by Heart, a course devoted to performing biblical selections for the seminary community. Many students who participated in this class later adopted the practice of memorizing a lectionary lesson as a way to prepare sermons and then present the passage by heart in worship.

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## **What Is This About?**

### *What is the theology behind scripture by heart?*

Worship is about what God is doing. We participate in worship in order to place ourselves in a position to learn about what God is doing, to celebrate what God is doing, to be transformed by what God is doing, and to be sent as agents of what God is doing. In worship, the reading of scripture teaches us, transforms us, and commissions us. The presentation of scripture is a central event in the life of worship.

### *What is the presentation of scripture?*

The presentation of scripture is a place where the gathered community encounters the Word of God in worship. It is the presentation of the words of ancient people witnessing to extraordinary things that God has done—and how humans have struggled to respond to God's activity. Through these human words, we encounter God's Word. The lector does not pretend to be the voice of God. The lector is sharing the words of witnesses who have gone before us attesting to the presence and activity of God in the world. The contemporary lector is called to make their ancient witness meaningful and powerful for us who hear these words today. The lector is the medium for scripture, much as a book of print serves as a medium for scripture. The goal of the lector is to be a faithful medium, one who will bring the scripture passage alive for us in our time of worship. In this calling, we are emboldened—even as we recognize both our human potential and our human frailty—to be servants of the Word. As Paul says, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels."

### *Who will benefit?*

Pastors will learn how to memorize scripture and how to employ this experience in the preparation of the sermon. Lay readers will benefit by making the lector role more meaningful and transformative for themselves and others.

### *Why present scripture “by heart”?*

First, we do it because that is how the writings collected in the New Testament were originally presented to early Christian communities. So also, the writings collected in the Hebrew Bible for Judean communities. In a culture in which 95% of the people did not read or write, people experienced the writings now in the Bible as oral performances to gathered communities.

Second, we want to make scripture meaningful and relevant for Christians gathered for contemporary worship.

Third, we want to enable the experience of presenting scripture in worship to be a transforming experience for the lector.

Fourth, we want to foster this approach as a generative way to do sermon preparation.

### *What is our approach?*

The approach is to give guidelines for memorizing a scriptural passage. Our emphasis is on *word-for-word memorization*, because we believe that the responsibility to present scripture in worship means that we need to be faithful to the words of scripture. Telling a scripture passage within the sermon or in other venues does not require the same disciplined memorization. In those contexts, one can give a faithful telling of a passage by getting the gist and grist of the passage without the precise words. However, in this tutorial, because of the focus on presentation in worship, we encourage memorization. We do not mean for memorization to be a burden; and mistakes will no doubt be made! But this is the goal.

### *Do we support reading the passage?*

Absolutely. Presenting scripture by memory is simply one option among several, not better or less than reading. We believe that reading well is very important. If you go through some of the steps we suggest for memorization, the experience will make you an even better reader. You can read from the heart just as well as you can tell by memory from the heart.

### *What if I cannot memorize?*

Many people do not memorize well. Then just do the best you can and do not prepare to present scripture from memory. Many people have had unfortunate experiences with memorizing as a child or earlier in life. If you want to proceed as freely as possible, I encourage you to reflect on these past experiences, pray for the healing of these memories—and then give it another try. I have found that almost to a person, those who have worked at this have found it much easier to do than they thought it would be. I encourage you to try it for at least five times and to see if it will work for you. Even if you let it go after this time, I hope you will have found resources here for a deeper love of and a more profound

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understanding of scripture.

### *What difference might this make?*

Presenting scripture by heart in worship has been a transformative experience for many congregations. The scripture comes directed to them personally and with a new immediacy; and they experience it together as a community. The experience makes the passage memorable. Often the reading of scripture is a transition time in a worship service or a time of “reading along” in the bulletin. The idea is of presenting scripture by heart is to make the presentation of the scripture a signal event in the worship service.

### *What is the philosophy behind the memorized presentation of scripture?*

The idea is that the presentation will be lively and done in a way that is meaningful and natural. The idea is not to draw attention to yourself, your memory skills, or your manner of presentation. Rather, the idea is to draw greater attention to the scripture being told. So the presentation must be done in a way that is both natural to you as presenter and meaningful for the hearers.

### *What is the importance of telling it well?*

We have often thought that the scripture reading is just a prelude to or a set-up for the sermon. The story or text is just presented in a straightforward, un-noteworthy way and then the preacher really tells us what it is about, draws the lesson or the moral of the text, and makes it relevant to our lives today. The result of this approach is that the story or text has no life of its own. It is simply a cipher for a moral or a lesson. Our approach in this tutorial appreciates the text in its own right. Only in the telling can its meaning become clear. Only in the telling can the story have the power to transform. Only in the telling can the text evoke emotions and convey pathos and elicit laughter. I consider the preaching on texts to be extremely important. At the same time, I often think that a sermon is sometimes like explaining a joke. It would be much better just to tell the joke well—and then comment on it! There is no substitute for the story itself, for the text. Let’s make it the event it should be in worship. Let’s tell it well.

### *Why should we tell scripture in a lively way?*

Some teachers tell pastors and other lectors not to read the scripture in a dynamic way, because that would be to interpret it. In their view, it is better to read in a straightforward way without emotion and with limited inflection. However, every reading is an interpretation. You cannot avoid it. And so telling it without emotion can be a very poor interpretation! We should tell scripture in a lively way when the passage calls for it. How can you tell a healing story without emotions of joy and wonderment? How can you tell about a conflict between Jesus and authorities without showing some intensity? How can you depict the crucifixion scenes without expressing pathos?

### *Is this a “performance”?*

It is so often the case that scripture is read differently from all other writings—in a monotone or with some kind of holy rhythm or with a stained-glass voice. This is unfortunate. So yes, we are encouraging a meaningful performance, but in the way in which “gospel music” is performing—telling good news from the heart with practice as a meaningful, indeed as an artistic, expression. The difference between gospel music and gospel telling is, of course, that scripture performances use words rather than music. And telling it makes use of very different styles and techniques from singing. But no, it is not a performance in the sense of a drama with overdrawn gestures and exaggerated emotions. Telling in worship is a lively but subdued performance that uses storytelling techniques in ways that are both very natural and very meaningful. In all cases, it needs to be appropriate to the particular context and tradition of worship.

### *How can I get myself out of the way?*

You might want to get yourself out of the way so that the focus is on the story. However, you cannot get yourself out of the way, because you are now the medium of this story. The medium is no longer the printing on the page. The point is to be aware of who you are—age, ethnic and racial identity, appearance, educational level, economic well-being, health, and so on, so that you can express yourself in ways that become a faithful medium for the scripture. Just be yourself telling the scripture in a meaningful and natural way. No one else can be the medium you are, and that will bear the Word in a particular and powerful way.

### *What passage do I learn and present?*

For many congregations, the passage will be chosen for you by the three-year Common Lectionary. You will be responsible for one or more of the three lessons assigned for each week and possibly also the psalm for the day (please consider the psalm for presentation by memory). For congregations not on the lectionary system, the passage will probably be chosen by the worship committee or by the one preaching. In either case, it is important to have access well ahead of time to the text to which you are assigned.

### *Which translation should I use?*

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In some cases, this will be determined by the tradition of the congregation or the materials provided by the denomination. In other cases, there may be several choices acceptable to congregation and denomination. You can study translations (not paraphrases) for worship and suggest one. Be sure to get permission from the proper folks in your congregation to do this. Also, it may be important to have the same translation for all the lessons in the same worship service. Also, it would be important to let the congregation know which translation you are presenting. I usually use the New Revised Standard Version.

### *Should I learn it from a Bible?*

It is helpful to see the passage in its context in the larger work from which it is drawn, as it would be in the Bible. Nevertheless, I find it helpful to make a photocopy of the page on which it appears. Better yet, I usually type it out onto a page where I can eliminate chapter and verse designations, so I can think of it more easily as a story or portion of a letter. Also, this practice enables me to arrange it on the page in ways that will assist my memorization.

## **How Do I Learn It?**

### *OK, how do I do it?*

There are many ways people employ to learn a passage by heart. Some find help by writing it out longhand in brief lines for memorization. Others like to make a tape of the passage and listen to themselves over and over, finding it helpful to repeat with their own voice. Still others find it helpful to have someone else read to them. Some find it helpful just to exercise the discipline to learn it line by line. It is important for you to find what works best for you.

### *Here is the two-step process I use to memorize a passage.*

The process suggested here is one that I use and find most effective for me. I also find it to be the quickest (for me). The process is simple.

### *What is the first step?*

The goal of the first step is to get an overall familiarity with the text. You can do this alone or with someone else. If you are a pastor with a study group, consider doing it in pairs.

- Begin by reading/studying the episode silently for five or more minutes as a means to recall it word for word as best you can.
- Then, close the Bible and recount what you have read as faithfully as possible. If you do it in pairs, be sure to make it clear that the one listening is not to follow along in the Bible while the other recounts the episode.
- Now look at the episode in the Bible and see what details were omitted, added, or changed in the telling. Remember, your goal is a word-for-word recollection.
- Now repeat the same process over again until your telling of it by memory fairly well approximates the text in the Bible. Now you are ready to move to the next step.

### *What is the second step?*

The goal of the second step is to nail down the details so that you can know it word-for-word with confidence.

- Take the first verse and read it over and over until you can say it without looking. Then say it five or ten times without looking, until you think you know it.
- Then, do the same thing with the next verse, until you know that one.
- Then practice the first two lines together.
- Then memorize the third verse.
- Then do all three verses together.
- And so on, until you “pretty well” are able to say the whole passage without looking.

The first effort at this process may take as little as twenty minutes or up to as much an hour, depending on the length of the passage. The effort is well worth it for everything that follows!!

*Hint:* If a verse is too long, break it up. Identify lengths of lines to memorize that seem to offer a natural break for meaning and breathing.

### *How do I learn it well?*

Repetition is the lifeblood of memorization. Repeat it often—when walking, driving, exercising, when going to sleep, when getting up. The idea is to know it as well as you know familiar songs or hymns. You know them so well you can sing them to yourself as if the words were your own—and you were saying them from your heart!

*Hint:* I practice the memory work for recollection without at the same time trying to practice the manner in which I will present it. Trying to think how I will present it takes away from the simple practice of remembering it. So I just practice repetitions of the words, often as fast as I can say the words. Then when I know the passage well, I begin to work on *how* I will present it.

*Hint:* In this process of repeated recall, you will hit lines and words you do not know as well as others. Stop and relearn that

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line by repeating it many times, as suggested above. Then practice the passage as a whole again.

*Note:* I carry a folded-up photocopy of the passage with me so that I can readily check what I do not remember, even if my Bible is not handy.

### *How will the process of memorization go?*

I find the following process happens for me. When I begin the memorization, I am trying to recall the words as they look on the page. Next, when I know them well, I am no longer thinking about the words on the page. Now the words are off the visual screen of the page and in the realm of sound. Here, I am anticipating the sound of the lines in my head as I prepare to speak them. Then, when I know them well enough, I am no longer anticipating the sound of the words that will come next. At this point, the words are my own and I can say them concentrating on the meaning. At this point, I am thinking about the scene I am describing in the story and acting it out. So, when I perform, I am running pictures of the scene in my head, and I am telling you and showing you what I am seeing in my imagination as it unfolds. This approach, when used in worship, conveys to the congregation a feeling that they are there experiencing it with you.

### **What are the benefits of the act of memorization in the service of interpretation?**

One of the benefits of word for word memorization is that you notice every detail. As you try to recall a line or the story/text as a whole, you will find that you will leave out a word or phrase, add something in, rearrange something, or substitute words. When this happens, you go back and relearn the words more precisely. However, there is a further benefit to this exercise. Note carefully the details of all differences of your telling from the words in the translation. I have found repeatedly that these differences are very often revealing and help us to interpret. Why? There is a tendency to omit or change what we do not like or do not agree with or do not understand. We may change words that are obscure or disagreeable. We may add something to make it say what we want it

to say rather than what it actually says. Also, we may leave things out that we consider unimportant or inconsequential details. Noticing these differences and trying to explain why we may have made them will help interpretation. Of course, perhaps you just forgot. On the other hand, we tend to remember what is familiar or what we expect to be there. The point is this: correcting what you changed or added or omitted may be the very thing that makes this text different from what you expect or want and may represent the details that enable you to see the story in a whole new way.

### *How else can I notice details in the text?*

Often after memorizing, I will do a question-asking exercise to explore the story or text. The key is to query the text out of a great sense of curiosity as a means to see what is there and what at this point I do not understand. So I will go line by line posing questions about the meaning, arrangement, sequence, wording, characters, events, settings—anything that may come to mind about the text itself. It is important not to try to answer any of the questions. That takes great discipline! Rather, the purpose, again, as in the last exercise, is to notice details, to identify what may seem strange, and to keep these things in mind as you pursue the process below. This exercise opens up interpretation rather than closing it down. It also helps you to recall the details of the story.

### *What are the personal benefits of learning by heart?*

One of the benefits of this process of memorization and regular recall is that you live with the passage as you go through your week. I recommend for pastors that the first and most helpful part of sermon preparation is to take twenty minutes to a half hour at the very start of the week to memorize the passage. The passage rumbles around in your head and your life during the week, and you make connections all the time. Lectors will know several weeks ahead when they will be presenting scripture. Use this time wisely to learn, to recall the passage, and to live with it—to make connections with events that happen, what you read, whom you meet, what you recall, and so on. For everyone, throughout your life, memorized lines of scripture and stories can provide personal ministry to you.

### *Imagination is important:*

Another technique that will help you remember the story is to imagine the scenario before you. Construct the situation of the story in your mind as concretely as you can: the places, the different characters (where they are situated and how they move about), the dialogues between characters, and the actions that take place. Situate yourself somewhere at the edge of the scene as an invisible observer. Then, in your telling, imagine yourself describing the scene “in front of you” that you have witnessed. Imagine you are the producer of a movie with this as a scene. How would you portray the story? If the text is a matter of speaking a prophecy, then imagine you are speaking as a prophet. If it is a letter you are recounting, then imagine presenting the letter to a community. This will help your recall of the passage, because you will have

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seen it unfold in your imagination.

*Hint:* Imagine it as vividly and realistically as you can. When you present the passage in worship, you will then be telling and showing others what you have seen!

### *Get into the characters:*

Another technique to help you remember is to tell the same story from the point of view of each of the characters. For example, tell the story of the healing of the bent woman in Luke 13:10-17 as if you were that woman telling the story afterward to others. Change all the pronouns so that reference to the woman is in the first person (“I”) and other references remain unchanged. Then switch and tell the story as if you were one of the synagogue attendees, and again as if you were Jesus, and again as if you were one of the synagogue leaders. It is amazing how much you will be able to recall the dialogue of each person when you do it this way. This experience can evoke emotions, which will also help you to remember.

*Hint:* When I do this exercise, I do not always do it by memory. I may simply practice reading it silently (with the changed pronouns) and then read it aloud with the appropriate emotions and tones of that person telling the story. If I read it aloud to someone else, we then talk about the experience.

*Hint:* This exercise is very helpful for sermon preparation. You get into the characters and you experience the same story from many angles.

### *Follow the plot or line of thinking:*

This exercise is so helpful for recall. The idea is to track every line and action in the story to see how it follows naturally from what went before. Take each line and draw an arrow to what follows it and make the connection: why someone does this? Or why does someone say this or that in response to what went just before. Divide the story by brief moments: intro, what one says or what one does back and forth, and the conclusion. This will be very helpful in recalling the story. In a letter, follow the line of thinking. This exercise will help you remember because you will have a sense of why one thing follows another—and this will trigger recall. When you do this, you will discover a logical movement

to the story with each bit of dialogue and each action being a response to what preceded.

*Hint:* This exercise is also important for sermon preparation, because it helps you understand why each thing happens, helps you follow the flow of the story, enables you to understand why it turns out as it does, and how the whole thing fits together. This is especially helpful if your sermon is an elaborate retelling of the story with commentary.

### ***Get the overall picture:***

Based on the last several exercises, identify what is at stake in the story: What is the problem being addressed? What is the conflict being resolved? What is the teaching about? This exercise gives you a sense of the driving purpose of the story and enables you to recall the story because of its presenting situation and the overall movement of the story toward resolution.

### ***Now get the overall impact:***

At this point, you may be in a position to ask: What is the desired impact of this story on the hearers? What are they supposed to get from it? What are they supposed to feel? How might they be different? This is a shift from teller to hearer, from text to impact, from what the story *means* to what the story *does* in the telling. Take some time to think about this and name it. Identifying the purpose of the story and its potential impact will give you a reason for telling the story to others, help you remember what you are doing, and give clues to *how* you might tell it.

*Hint:* One way to think about your sermon is to identify the impact the story was meant to have—and then preach so as to engender that same impact.

### ***How can I proclaim something I do not believe in?***

Before you move to performing, it may be helpful to identify aspects or elements of the story or text that are particularly troublesome—for you and/or potentially for your congregation. We know there are offensive passages in the biblical text, for examples, passages that glorify violence or that reinforce the suppression of women or homosexuals or other groups or that are anti-Jewish. These texts will be oppressive to certain people and may give license to other people to dominate or discriminate. Lay lectors should consult with the preacher about the passage. You may want to omit this reading from worship and substitute another. You may want to note the difficulty and offer some appropriate words about it in the introduction to the presentation of the passage. Or you may want to be sure to deal with it in the sermon, to put the passage in its ancient context, and even preach *against* the text. In any case, the Bible has been used to do a great deal of harm. Performing a passage faithfully, as you are challenged to do here, but without comment, can lead to very unfortunate results that will end up running counter to the life of love, justice, and peace promoted by the Bible overall. Given the authority we give to the Bible, this book can be dangerous when it is misappropriated. Use it with care.

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## **How Do I Perform It?**

### ***How do I present the passage in worship?***

Again, let me repeat. The idea is that you tell scripture in a meaningful way appropriate to the content of the passage and that you do it in a way natural to you, as you might tell such a story as if you yourself had witnessed it. Of course, I will encourage you to stretch a little what seems natural to you, but only as you expand your comfort zone. If you tend to be dramatic, tone it down. This is no place or time to show off. This is scripture; and the idea is to make it live in ways that people can receive it afresh. At the same time, performing is different from straight reading in several ways, all subdued in worship, but nonetheless different.

### ***Be the voices.***

If you do a straight reading, you will probably not sound as if you are the narrator or the characters speaking. You are just yourself reading this. Every line is said basically with the same tone or pace. But if you perform, you take on the tone and voice of the narrator and then in turn each of the characters as they speak. If you are a character asking for a healing, you speak as if you are that person asking for a healing. Put yourself in the place of the character speaking and say it as you think that character might say it in relation to the character(s) to whom they are speaking. Do it realistically. If you are one of the establishment leaders challenging Jesus, then sound like them. If you are Jesus in the act of teaching, then speak as if teaching someone. If you are the narrator depicting the calming of a storm, then bear the tone of someone telling about an astounding event. This approach in itself will make an enormous difference in how you present and in how well people will understand the passage. Your change of tone from speaker to speaker in an episode should not be excessive, but it should be marked.

*Hint:* The exercise of retelling the story from the perspective of different characters (described above in an earlier section) will greatly assist in this approach. Your main goal is to put yourself in the place of each character and ask what they are trying to accomplish by what they say—and then say it accordingly.

### *Think about your inflection.*

Again, the tone may vary from line to line with the same speaker or with different speakers. Note where you place emphasis, when your voice is soft or strong, where you pitch the words or phrases.

*Hint:* It is a common exercise for performers to take one line and say it many different ways, in order to see what different meanings may be implied by saying it this way or that (or by emphasizing a different word each time you say it). Every line has a subtext—the message conveyed by *how a line is spoken*. For example, when the Jesus chastises the disciples for not understanding, is he angry? Patient? Frustrated? Exasperated? Or something else? Play with this exercise in order to see what interpretations are possible and how it might expand your understanding of the meanings. Make choices that you think best fit the story or speech.

### *Use your voice in other ways.*

Consider also whether your voice is louder or softer, rises or falls, slows down or speeds up. Consider where to make pauses for emphasis or to make transitions or to convey suspense. Do not do these things in any artificial way. You yourself use these facets of speaking everyday in ordinary conversation. Just become aware of them, so that you use them naturally here also, rather than falling into a monotone or a sing-song rhythm or an unchanging pace.

### *Use facial expressions.*

Again, these will only work if they are subdued and suggestive rather than extreme. They should help to express what you are saying: a look of puzzlement, an expression of amazement, an intensity of the eyes, a smile or a frown, an appearance of sadness, some desperation in a request. These must be natural. They cannot be mechanical looks that just seem to accompany some words. What would you naturally show with your face in the course of telling and showing one thing or another? These expressions, then, are not just “illustrations” of emotion or meaning. They are an integral part of how you say what you want to say and what you want to show.

### *Use gestures.*

Again, in worship contexts, I discourage extreme gestures, as they can distract from the scripture. Rather, gestures can be suggestive. You can move in the direction of making a full gesture but suggest it rather than carry it out. Also, gestures cannot be mechanical illustrations of what one is saying or describing. They can be natural gestures, as you yourself might use if you were telling and showing someone what you had witnessed. Often gestures are depicted in or suggested by the story itself. Gestures can be pointing, laying on of hands, nodding, shrugging the shoulders, raising hands in praise, shaking the head, among others.

*Hint:* You may want to practice with extreme gestures so as to make clear what the gesture is you want to use, then back off to express an easier, suggestive gesture. Your gestures should be limited if you are presenting behind a pulpit or lectern. However, if you present in the chancel or aisle, it may be natural to be more

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expansive in your gestures.

*Hint:* If you have a habitual gesture, such as a pumping of the hand or a swaying motion, do this in an extreme way in practice as a means of becoming aware of it, so as to avoid doing it in performance. Or strap your arm to your side to develop other gestures! You will probably not get rid of it overnight, so be patient with yourself. Or just live with it!

### *Putting it all together.*

There are a lot of things to keep in mind when you are trying to *remember* the words at the same time as you are also trying to practice *how* to say them! Therefore, do not try these exercises all at once. Begin just by learning a passage by heart and telling it. As you get more comfortable and you need to make a passage work better for you, then try some of these features of performing—more sensitivity to inflection, greater use of facial expressions, and the addition of some gestures. Start with what makes you feel natural and comfortable, and then stretch yourself and try something new until you feel comfortable with that.

### *Just try it!*

One way to practice is to tell the passage to someone—family, friends, a prayer circle or Bible study group, others. In the end, you just need to do it with the congregation. You will learn it only by trying it—and finding what works for you, what works for your congregation, and how it may deepen your common faith. Luther said, “Sin boldly” or, more appropriately here, “Perform boldly!” So, in the confidence that we are loved and forgiven, we should not hesitate to act for fear that we will fail.

## What Happens At Worship?

### *Is it like we usually do?*

I assume you will be doing what you usually do for scripture reading at worship, except that you are telling it by heart rather than reading it (although you may be reading it). You may want to be in a different place in the sanctuary or set the presentation up a different way, but this is not necessary.

### *Do I explain what I am doing at first?*

Some pastors just start the practice and let people experience it and catch on. Others feel it is important to explain what they are doing. If people have Bibles where they usually follow along

or a bulletin insert with the scripture lessons written out, then perhaps you want to invite people to look up and listen—or they might miss the whole thing! At first, people are enamored with the different experience or they are amazed by your memory. But the idea is not to make much of that. After awhile, people tend to settle in, take it for granted as a regular (or irregular) practice, and have a new love for the experience of scripture at worship.

### **What about introducing the passage to the congregation?**

It can help sometimes to introduce the particular passage you will present (whether doing it by memory or reading it), simply by explaining what the passage is about and perhaps identifying something people should listen for. This is as brief as a line or two, after which you move right into the telling of the passage.

### ***Do I present from the lectern or out front?***

It all depends on the size of the church, the number of people present, the practices of the congregation, your comfort level, the comfort level of the congregation, and whatever else figures in. I generally present from the lectern or the pulpit (if I am preaching from the pulpit).

### ***Do I keep a copy of the text nearby?***

I always do. If I present by memory from the lectern, I always have a copy on the lectern in front of me. If I present in the chancel or the aisle, I always carry a Bible open or closed with a marker. Or I will have a printed sheet with my passage on it either in my hand or on a nearby stand or pew. I do not wish my memory lapses to be a problem for people in the congregation—by having them worry about me! The simplest solution is to be able to consult the passage easily and readily in order to refresh your memory and then just to keep going. No one will have a problem with that. So, no matter how well I think that I know something, I do not ever perform free-fall or without a net!

### ***In the end, can I just read it to the congregation?***

Absolutely, I hope you do. And you will find that your reading will be transformed by this process. And if you start from memory and need to read the rest, just do it. It is all a learning process for you and the congregation.

### ***So, what if I make mistakes or do not do well?***

Cool it. Again, this is the Lord's work; and we are empowered by God to do it with freedom to succeed or to fail. I suspect that the congregation will be so appreciative of your efforts that they will readily accept and forgive your foibles and failings.

### ***Should I get feedback?***

By all means! People who speak to you personally may be reluctant to criticize your style or offer suggestions. I urge you to pick a few folks who can be trusted to give you honest and constructive feedback in love. Find a time and a place when they can meet to do

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that in a serious way. They will also be able to tell you how others are responding. Meet with them on a regular basis to get their affirmations and suggestions. Consider videotaping the presentation of scripture and watching it together with your support group, then reflecting on it together. Listen to them! They will be your coaches. More importantly, they will tell you if and how they have heard and encountered the Word of God through this practice.

### ***How can this serve as a spiritual discipline?***

Memorizing scripture and telling it can surely deepen your understanding of scripture and its transformative power in your life. You may be able to make a regular discipline of it, accompanied by prayer and meditation. In the process, be careful not to make the scripture or the experience of presenting into a “holier-than-thou” kind of approach—either to your own discipline or to the scripture itself. The scriptures are earthy. They are about real people struggling with tough problems and situations. They are about God's efforts in the here-and-now to reach people in the nitty-gritty of everyday life. Keeping this in mind will ground you for the task of proclaiming to others so as to make sure you do not by-pass your own potential for transformation in the effort to be a vehicle of new life for others.