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The pause

Some of the nation's best preachers share the thoughts, feelings and prayers that fill the moment before preaching.

by [Jason Byassee](#)



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Most adrenaline-inducing activities feature a point of no return. You've marched down the aisle, the intentions have been spoken and the preacher asks, "Do you?" Even if you don't, it's too late to turn back now. Or you're about to appear on camera. The man behind the contraption counts down, mouths "one" and the red light comes on.

Or you're about to preach. The last hymn has been sung, and Scripture has been read. Your heart is thumping, and you're breathing a little too fast. How come this mic is so awkward? Can they hear me singing? Do I have all my pages? There's no more time. You're on. And the congregation didn't come to hear about how nervous you are or are not -- they came to hear about God.

How do the great ones feel in that moment? It's a pregnant pause -- as when a conductor is about to begin, and performers and audience alike are on edge with anticipation. What goes through preachers' minds in that hyper-vigilant nanosecond?

Quite a lot.

They experience excitement and fear. They notice the fussy child in the fourth pew. They search for a

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friendly face. They try to clear their minds of the questions parishioners have asked in the moments before. They fret about tripping. They have sudden urges to use the restroom.

And they experience a full attunement to God and the congregation, a prayer that carries them through the sermon.

Walter Brueggemann, emeritus professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, says he regularly has a sense that “what I have is inadequate.” So Brueggemann looks for a sympathetic face, “a person or two who look like they will want to hear and respond.” Brueggemann imagines a helpful prayer from these sympathetic onlookers. “Help him, Jesus,” he hears them saying. And through them, he looks to connect with the others gathered in a “genuine communication about what is urgent between us.”

Fellow preachers may take comfort in Brueggemann’s sense of inadequacy. He’s one of the great biblical interpreters and preachers of our time -- and he feels that way?

Thomas G. Long is Bandy Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology and was ranked by Baylor University in 1996 as one of the great preachers in the English-speaking world.

“I have battled a lifelong tendency toward stage fright,” he said. He mostly has mastered this tendency, yet it still “comes on more intensely than I wish it did...[and] still affects my preaching negatively.”

Like Brueggemann, Long also notices something outside himself, in addition to his own trepidation.

“Congregations radiate their own experience with preaching,” he said. “If they have been well-treated from the pulpit, they respond with alertness and interest.” But if not, they tune out: “Though I wish I did not react to this, it is difficult not to experience a momentary wave of anger when the congregation wanders away before your first sentence is spoken.”

Not everyone feels anxiety in that moment.

Peter Marty, pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa, asks God to “sink some humility deep within me.” Standing in front of a crowd and pontificating requires a healthy sense of self, so Marty also asks God for help -- in getting out of the way.

“Help me to give them the chance to be changed,” Marty prays. “Even if it is only a little bit, I want them to walk away as different people.” Then, in what Marty describes as “a cheering sort of move,” he adds, “You can do it, Lord,” as though God needed the encouragement. “I mutter words just like these to myself and to my God every single week. For years and years.”

Prayer here seems to reach deeper than the pious intonations with which most sermons start (“Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts...”). The prayers offered here run deep and involve a connection to God that borders on the mystical. These experiences suggest another definition of prayer altogether. Perhaps prayer is a heightened awareness of God, and so of all things -- an energy as biological as adrenaline, a moment in which one wishes to dwell and remain forever.

Like that final moment before the “I do” or the final second before the camera begins rolling. The point of no return, when all the senses, all creation, are in focus.

To Trygve Johnson, chaplain at Hope College, that moment is when he reminds himself to “release the mechanism,” as the aging pitcher puts it in the Kevin Costner baseball movie “For the Love of the Game.” To Costner’s ballplayer, that pause before his first pitch is when all of Yankee Stadium quiets and it’s just him and the ball and the batter. So, too, for Johnson.

“Everything is simplified, and I have a strange sensation of energized purpose...everything is slower, and more concentrated,” he said.

Laura Truax, pastor of LaSalle Street Church in Chicago, says she must fight back tears in that moment. “There just seems to be a lot of pent-up passion and energy in those last seconds,” she said. “I feel contained, present and available, and all of the free-floating electrical ions that swept over me” in preparation allow her to connect with the people in the pews.

These preachers speak the way athletes do about being in the flow of a game, or soldiers about being

caught up in a greater purpose. It's a singular form of concentration so exhilarating it's like a drug. It's like a particularly concentrated form of prayer, with all of one's senses attuned to God and all of one's glands pumping the Holy Spirit.

Will Willimon, United Methodist bishop in Alabama and, with Long, a member of the greatest-preacher list, called it "true freedom -- the peculiar freedom of the artist who is a slave to the art."

"You have no worries or cares, your body, mind and soul are caught up in one desire -- to be used by God, to be God's voice," Willimon said.

Just then it is important to harness all that emotion, all that gland-based, quite physical rush, and attend fully to the moment, to the task at hand, the people in front and to God. Those moments remind preachers why they do what they do.

They not only demand prayer. They are prayer.