



Have you heard this preacher tic?

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Written by Layton Friesen, PhD

Have you heard this preacher tic? “I know we’ve all heard this story many times before but let me tell you about David and Goliath....”

Why do we preachers say this so often? It’s a universal preacher tic. We feel the need to tell listeners that “you’ve heard this story many times.” Start listening for it and next time you hear it, send your pastor this article.

This tic signals my insecurity as a preacher. When I bring up Moses again, I feel pressure from the crowd to impress them, to reveal some never-before-uttered truth that will surprise my jaded listeners. And when I begin to doubt whether I have anything interesting to say, I lose my nerve and quickly assure everyone, “Nothing new to see here.”

This tic is a defeating habit. These are stupendous, life-changing stories that will transform whoever hears if they have ears to hear. But I need to manage expectations? To assure my listeners there is nothing they will hear now they’ve never heard countless times before?

The first problem with this tic is that it’s not true. On any given Sunday there are new believers or non-believers present who have never heard of Bethlehem or Golgotha. Why not preach to them too? In fact, a simple way to instantly improve preaching is to preach only to those people: the young, the keeners, the un-initiated, and the ignorant. If the sermon would just ignore the old cynic who sits with arms crossed daring the preacher to impress him and would speak only to those hearing the Word for the first time, the sermon would quickly sparkle for everybody.

Second, not only is the tic inaccurate, it’s also unkind. It tells newcomers they are in the wrong place. “This sermon is for people who know these stories and if you do not, you probably don’t belong here.”

Third, the tic feeds the dishonest arrogance of those listeners who think they know the Bible and believe that this preacher certainly will not move them with a new fact.

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But fourth, and most importantly, the tic dishonours the living Word of God. It comes as an apology by the preacher for asking listeners to endure this story, yet again.

No! This Word has never before happened in this moment. Yes, George heard about Goliath five years ago when he went bankrupt, but yesterday he was told of a spot on his liver, and we need to do more tests. Melissa heard about Elijah and the widow when she was a poor student back in grad school. But this week she gave birth to her fourth child. Back in the 1980s Jack the sulky teenager did hear and fear the story of Herod’s worms, but this week his son passed the bar exam and where do you think the boy got the smarts from? This person, in this situation, has never heard that story before, and needs it badly.

None of these people should be assured they have heard the story before. The Word is coming at them today with new power from a new direction to their newly cleaned ears. No preacher has the right to temper expectations. Every Sunday we are a whole new congregation.

The Word unfurled over a congregation is an unpredictable mystery. No one can guess what the Spirit will pull this Sunday from that trunk full of keys, knives, bandages, candlesticks, disinfectants and ointments we call the Scriptures. Least of all the preacher.