

HOOK —AND— HOPE

THE ART OF CASTING
THE FUNERAL SERMON

THOMAS LYBERG

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BY THOMAS LYBERG

CSS Publishing Company, Inc.
Lima, Ohio

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FIRST EDITION
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lyberg, Thomas, 1964- author

Title: Hook and hope : the art of casting the funeral sermon / by Thomas Lyberg.

Description: First edition. | Lima, Ohio : CSS Publishing Company, Inc, 2026.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024061828 | ISBN 9780788031458 paperback | ISBN 9780788031465 adobe pdf

Subjects: LCSH: Preaching | Funeral sermons

Classification: LCC BV4211.3 .L89 2026 | DDC 251--dc23/eng/20251128

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024061828>

For more information about CSS Publishing Company resources, visit our website at www.csspub.com, email us at csr@csspub.com, or call (800) 241-4056.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7880-3145-8

ISBN-10: 0-7880-3145-7

PRINTED IN USA

To my "Funeral Groupies," the dear saints of my six congregations over the years who would take breaks from preparing funeral meals to hear my sermons for those saints they treasured and the strangers in death they served in equal Christlike love. It is their persistent encouragement over more than 25 years of "it's just like you knew them," and "you need to teach this to other pastors" that finally gave birth to this book. Thank you for your support and the funeral cookies.

To my dad, Rev. H. Peter Lyberg, who's example as both dad and pastor led me to proudly follow in his footsteps.

To my wife, Carla, who has loved me in all our many moves and has patiently encouraged this book to finally come to fruition, a special thank you.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

I remember the phone call that late afternoon.

I was a young pastor in the first year of my first call to a parish. Living in the small county seat town of Kenton in Central Ohio, best known for its quiet Amish community and the long-closed Gene Autry cap gun factory, our family of three had settled into our new home with great joy and anticipation of serving our small Lutheran mission congregation. Our neighbors were a colorful and friendly bunch that included a member of the church across the street who lived with her outdoorsman son and aging mother; an elderly widower who, while gruff, would constantly gift us with everything from garden vegetables to steaks; and Tom, one of the local funeral directors, who was the third generation of the family business, something that was still common back in the 1990s.

It was Tom who called and wanted to ask and do a favor for the young new pastor. He had heard me preach my first funeral sermon not long after my arrival for a well-known and beloved saint of the congregation and thought I did a fine job. I wasn't quite so sure as I honestly had no idea as to what I was doing that day as my seminary proclamation classes did little more than a cursory study of special occasion sermons like funerals and weddings. But I took the compliment in stride and asked what I could do to help.

Tom had a situation and wanted my help with a service at the funeral home in two days for a local man who died. The difficult part was that there was no family other than his widow — no children, no siblings, no extended family in the area at all. They were not church people but like so many who grieve, the widow was asking for a pastor to lead the funeral rather than a funeral director and Tom thought of me first. New to town with a wife and toddler, he thought we could use the extra paycheck and I would have the gentle touch this woman needed in her grief. I thanked him but said I didn't know the man and would have no idea what to say. He countered that they weren't church people and that really didn't matter. She didn't want a full religious service, just three Bible readings, some select words, and a prayer. I could stop by the funeral home and pick up the obituary. There wasn't even going to be a local burial, so just an hour at the funeral home was all that was needed, and he was certain I would do fine. So, I agreed, picked up the materials from Tom, and wrote a short sermon that made references to the deceased and "I am the resurrection and the life," along with a couple choice mentions of hobbies from the obit.

I showed up at the funeral home thirty minutes in advance. In walking down the hall to the viewing rooms, I noted as I passed portraits of Tom's dad, two uncles, and his grandfather, that the sign board only listed one viewing for the day. Looking ahead, I saw Tom, who came to greet me and show me into

the chapel. There was the deceased, laid out in a simple metal casket, dressed in a business suit with a union pin on the lapel.

Tom guided me to the lone figure seated in the room — a primly dressed woman in a dark blue skirt and jacket, her gray hair drawn up in a bun, and blue eyes that watered with tears. Tom introduced me as the local Lutheran pastor, to which she said that she had attended a Lutheran church growing up and remembered her confirmation back in Pennsylvania. She was very grateful for me taking the time to “do the service” for her husband.

I thanked her and then moved to the small speaker’s podium where I placed my Bible and note cards, adjusted the microphone, and then excused myself to wait in the hall with Tom. My thought was to greet the other people as they arrived to pay their respects and perhaps learn a little more about the deceased.

No one came.

At eleven o’clock, Tom and I walked in and I began a funeral service for the three of us. The widow sat there stoically, occasionally dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief while Tom sat across from her, giving me unspoken encouragement for what had turned into a confusing dive into tragedy for me. I announced the invocation of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. I read Psalm 23 emphasizing the words, “the Lord is my shepherd” with all the flagging conviction I could muster. I proclaimed Jesus’ pronouncement, “I am the resurrection and the life” with a hope that rang as hollow as that empty room. My few words of a sermon felt canned and meaningless as I recounted his business achievements and hobbies. I swiftly moved to the Lord’s Prayer and the final blessing of the deceased, glad that this hollow exercise was over.

With the service ended, I walked over to the widow and offered my deepest condolences. She thanked me, patted the seat next to her, and asked if might sit with her for a few minutes before leaving. I did and she took my cold nervous hand into

hers, aged with arthritis and care. Tom excused himself and left the room, leaving the two of us in the uncomfortable quiet.

"He was a good husband. You didn't know him but tell me he was a good man."

"He was a good husband and a good man."

"Tell me he will be okay."

"He is in God's hands, just like you. He will be okay."

She smiled, grasped my hand, and didn't speak again. We just held hands for a few more minutes until I excused myself and left feeling inadequate to my calling, grieving this woman without hope. As I walked out to the parking lot, I knew there had to be a better way to share the resurrection hope of Jesus than what I just did, something was as personal and powerful our Savior. I just didn't know how.

Thirty-three years later, I still do not remember her or her husband's names. But through the Holy Spirit unexpectedly working through them, I began the journey to become a better pastor able to cast a funeral sermon of hope in Jesus Christ in the face of death, for all the children of God whom he calls by name.

CHAPTER 2: THE RIVER AND THE FISH

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. (Matthew 4:18-22)

There is an art to fishing that has always fascinated me. Growing up in Naples, Florida, I used to be able to watch the fishermen on the pier. Many were retirees that had come down from up north — “snowbirds” we called them. They would stand out on the pier with great big tackle boxes and huge poles hoping to hit a run of mackerel or maybe a delicious red snapper or two. All day they would stand out there, often visiting, giving each other tips, but always watching that pole, adjusting the bait so it would float below the surface at just the right depth where the fish would be.

But there is a style of fishing that one old timer showed me once that I was in awe of — fly fishing. While I have never had a chance to try it myself, there seems to be an undeniable art to the entire process. While fishing at the pier, this man would tie his own flies — simple hooks intricately tied with feathers, reflectors, and other objects. These were not used for fishing from the pier. These were the bait for the great trout and giant salmon back home in Minnesota and up in Canada that he prized more than anything he caught in the Gulf of Mexico.

The art was not just in the design of your fly, the adorned hook that would catch the fish. The art was also in the act of fishing itself, the hope of being able to entice some monster lurking below the surface that this disguised piece of metal was a fat delicious insect, so beautiful that it must be consumed entirely. He described how he would take his fly rod and with very elaborate casts on the wind, dance the lure across the flowing waters of the river, enticing the fish with hook and hope.

I still enjoy watching the dance of fly fishermen on TV. I once played with a practice pole — a fly rod with a metal weight on the end — and quickly discovered that my fishing skill learned on the pier and in lake boats was of no use in fly fishing. Casting flies was an entirely different matter and in no time at all, you could end up with tangle of line that would take hours to unravel from a single minute of mistakes. So, never living anywhere where fly fishing was possible, I would catch my salmon and trout in the local grocery store and admired the art at a distance rather than actually practicing it.

Preaching is an art that all pastors must master to some degree of competence and while each of us leaves seminary convinced that we are the most insightful and Spirit filled preachers of our generation, our congregations know better and in our heart of hearts, we know as well. However, in leading a congregation, you discover there are many styles of preaching that you are called to engage in and some are harder than others. Expository or inspirational, life application or storytelling, stewardship and motivational, there are a variety of purposes. Style wise, there is the venerable three-point sermon and the tried-and-true verse by verse exposition. Today we have a variety of media driven styles, using images, video, or songs that connect so powerfully in the twenty-first century but often blur into entertainment if you are not careful. Lastly, we have the occasional sermons — sermons preached for special times in the life of a congregation: certain church festivals if you are part of a liturgical tradition like me (Lutheran) or other religious observances like weddings. But

the one occasional sermon that every pastor must sooner or later try their hand at is funerals and this requires different tools for preaching that are every bit as different as pier fishing is from fly fishing.

Preaching at funerals and weddings, the best-known occasional sermons, have some common elements. First, both are occasions where you as preacher have the chance to speak to a large number of unchurched people. Today, with the majority of Americans being unchurched or at least disconnected from any life in a faith community, the family gatherings for weddings and funerals represent two occasions when the unchurched and dechurched willingly enter a church building and listen to the gospel being proclaimed. Second, both are occasions when the popular expectation is that a person and their good works will be proclaimed, not the gospel. By that I mean that people come to weddings and funerals typically because of the people involved, not the God who is going to be worshiped. Wedding preaching can often devolve into the telling of cute stories about the couple and the depth of their love and funeral sermons turn into eulogies of the deceased, that we all should be more like them in life and faith, even if we all know they were scoundrels who never set foot in a church other than in a casket. Lastly, these sermons are personal, in that you almost always have to meet with those you will be preaching to, hear what is most deeply touching their hearts, and connect those intimate realities with the proclamation of the gospel, all while looking them in the eye.

My personal journey of discovery as a preacher is that in these occasional sermons, but particularly in the funeral sermon, there is a fly-fishing art to be learned to cast the gospel as hook and hope for those who are gathered to hear. Unlike the typical Sunday sermon, where the faithful crowd gathers Sunday after Sunday to experience you trolling for the gospel in familiar Bible stories or casting out into the deep waters of doctrine or denominational heritage, the funeral sermon requires the creative art and intimate touch of fly fishing, the crafting

of a *hook* that blends the uniqueness of a child of God with the gospel that shapes and saves not just the deceased but presents a *hope* that the listener will desire to consume entirely, drawing them into a comforting relationship of new life in Jesus Christ.

What began in that small town funeral 33 years ago turned into a preaching approach that I consider to be incarnational in the biblical sense, a simple pattern that I call “hook and hope.” Frankly, I don’t think it is any amazing breakthrough in homiletics — it just a method for funeral sermons that has worked for me. More importantly, has been a vehicle that the Holy Spirit has used repeatedly with the families and congregations that I have had the privilege to minister to and hopefully can assist you in the task of preaching the funeral sermon.

Knowing The River And The Fish

If you are going to take up fly fishing, you first need to understand the setting of the river and the fish that swim within those waters. Fishing for rainbow trout in North Carolina is very different from casting for coho salmon in the Pacific Northwest. The same is true with the setting of the funeral service — this is not a typical gathering of people for a typical Christian worship service. Before you can preach, you need to understand the setting you are wading into. So here is my description of the river of an American funeral in the twenty-first century and how it differs from Sunday morning:

1. People think the funeral is all about the deceased.

When a person dies, most folks want to keep some connection to that person, to be able to celebrate what they treasured about them, and set aside, at least for a time, their flaws and foibles. Churched or not, there will be displays of pictures and videos at the viewing and at the church, memorabilia that the family will adamantly want front and center celebrating the deceased. Newly written poetry by distraught relatives and treasured newspaper clippings and emails will be presented for you to read as part of the worship service. If you are

lucky, someone may suggest something from the Bible. More than likely, there will be a request by a family member to “say a few words” that will probably be more than a “few” words and end in a gush of unbri-dled emotion. Not matter what, the reason most people come is for honoring the deceased, not for Christian worship.

2. **Everyone is afraid of death.** Or more precisely, dying. As one stand-up comic put it years ago, “I am not afraid of dying. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” That statement is probably a good summation of the American attitude toward death. For entertainment, we will watch movies and television programs filled with death, ranging from high body count action films where people get riddled with bullets to touching dramas where the main character bravely dies after struggling against terminal disease or old age. We do not fear death as entertainment, we fear death personally and it is only at funerals that most Americans see death personally. Even with all the skills of a mortician, the common funeral comment isn’t true — they don’t “look good”, they look dead, and everyone is thinking about it.
3. **At least half of those gathered for a funeral are not Christian.** I include the “C and E” Christians in this group (Christmas and Easter only) as well as those who are church “members” but don’t participate. Beyond the veneer of American social Christianity (“We all believe in God...” “They’re in heaven now...”), these are part of the “Nones” — people who do not participate in a religious denomination or have anything deeper than vague “spiritual” beliefs. For them there is no distinction between reincarnation or resurrection, no concern about sin or salvation, or any of the things most Christians consider core beliefs and sources of hope. They

are only there to support the bereaved and have few answers to their own questions about life and death.

4. **You have people searching for answers.** We live in a time where people are searching for answers to the hardest questions of life: is there anything after death? Is there a God? Did this person die in an accident because it was God's will, God was angry, or God was absent? Even more so, the image that congregations and preachers have often presented to searchers is that your questions are not welcome, they must be discarded if you have true faith. As I have found in my congregational ministry, in my podcast back in the early 2000s, and since Covid, people who do not see themselves as "Christian" desperately want to talk to non-judgmental Christians who don't mind the questions, who don't try and have all the answers, who will offer a Jesus-like relationship in real life instead of four steps and a sinner's prayer to save you from a vengeful God sending you to hell.
5. **They expect nothing of significance from you.** While that sounds harsh, my guess is most of us have suffered (and probably preached our share) of bad sermons. Preaching has a bad rap in the secular world as being dull, judgmental, and irrelevant to real life. While people in the church you serve may groan every now and then about "long sermons", they are at least willing to put up with you and often find that the Holy Spirit does in fact work through your preaching. Most of the people at a funeral have neither the expectation or experience for anything to happen at all, so there is genuine surprise and real impact from an effective funeral sermon.

While a little stark, this has been my experience of those who gather for funeral, no matter the size of the crowd or lack thereof. This is the setting in which we do congregational

ministry today, the waters in which every pastor must cast their funeral sermons. Having served in the midwest for more than two decades and for many years now in Florida, I have learned the difference between pop and soda, but I have not seen any difference in those who gather for a funeral. A change in geography does not change the human heart, in its deepest hurts or in its aspirational yearnings. The river is still water, no matter where it flows. Knowing this, pastors can put together a toolkit like a skilled fly-fisherman and begin to create hook and hope in a Christian funeral sermon for those who are grieving.

CHAPTER 3: THE ART OF THE HOOK

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables... Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.' (Matthew 13:1-2a; 34-35)

It's an amazing experience to watch someone who can tie fishing flies. In their tool kit they have all kinds of very common items like feathers, beads, metal slivers and strings and with very careful skill they can create an object that fish will find irresistible in a particular place, at particular time. Some work best for trout, others for salmon, and other lures prove irresistible to other river fish. All these creative items are meant to draw the fish from the cool deeper waters to bite on the irresistible food on the surface that hides the hook. And once they take the fly, you set the hook and the dance of the fisherman begins to draw them close and out of the water connected only with a hidden hook, a fragile line, a thin pole, and the skill of the fisherman. Often times a twist of the fish releases the hook, an unexpected dive can snap a line, but with patience, the fisherman can guide the struggle until exhausted, the now caught fish can be hauled in.

An effective funeral sermon requires a similar toolbox of common items to meet a grieving community where they are to draw them out into God's kingdom and I have found that the key is what I call *the hook*. Simply put, the hook is a specific

gospel expression from scripture adorned with a compelling life story of the deceased. A patient preacher will adorn the funeral service itself with the traditions of denomination and community and the sermon with nuggets of common truth and encouragement, all for the cause of presenting the gospel in the context of a person's funeral. But the challenge is to find the hook, the point of connection between the deceased and faith and that you draw out for the gathered people so they might hear hope in Jesus.

As you begin your prayers and pondering for a funeral sermon, if you recognize the setting, the context of the deceased and community, you can begin to collect the common items you need for the hook for the gospel. For me, the hook must be personal and incarnational and I see Jesus as the model for us to follow. The parables of Jesus are classic examples of what I mean by hook — stories using common images and understandings of life in first-century Judea and Galilee: farmers, seeds, trees, sheep, fathers and sons, and the list goes on. If it was part of daily life for everyday people, it found its way into a story that drew you in personally but then incarnated the reality of God in a way that was unavoidable. "The kingdom of God is like..." begins with personal images but then draws you irresistibly into the presence of God right in the middle of where you are living in the here and now.

The process is exactly the same as crafting a funeral sermon. You are presented with the challenge to take the common realities of death, a life lived among family and friends, hobbies and work, and show how God has come through to change the living. Look and listen for stories about the deceased; observe items in their home or rooms; ask people in the congregation and community about the person as you have opportunity. Start to collect these nuggets of common living to adorn your sermon. As you do that, I would recommend that you keep some of these thoughts in your toolbox as you craft your hook.

1. **Remember the funeral is, first and foremost, a worship service of God revealed in Jesus Christ.** Funeral

services are called worship services and whether a distinction is made between a funeral (the body is present) and a memorial service (no body present), that changes nothing. The same is true of the setting: whether a church worship space, a graveside, or a funeral home, as a pastor, I would argue that if you are leading, it should always be conducted in all ways as a worship service. When the people of God gather, we are there to worship the One who has given us life and who receives that life back. A simple test to keep you focused is that if the service and sermon mention the deceased more than God revealed in Jesus Christ, you're probably tying the wrong hook.

- a. I remember one funeral I was involved with early on in one of my congregations. I say, "involved with" because sometimes circumstances and congregation nullify that title "senior pastor" and any authority that comes with it. The man who had died had been a long-serving county politician who was also a member of the congregation. We had not met and when the family came to plan the service, there was a long list of dignitaries who had already been asked to speak. It was recommended that I "do the church part" first and then let the dignitaries conclude, and that is what we did. The result was that the gospel was proclaimed, Jesus crucified and risen so that Arthur might have eternal life. But then after that, there was an hour of tributes on Arthur's virtues as a local politician and faith and was forgotten in a local photo op. The service ended with a call to civic duty like Art, not a call to faith in Jesus. I didn't let that happen again. Tributes, fraternal rites, and military honors are always before the proclamation of the gospel in the service and at graveside. It is Jesus who has the last word in remembering those who have died in Christ. Without that, a sermon is

a motivational talk at best and will ultimately lack any hope rooted in God.

2. **Remember the occasion for the funeral is the death of a real, unique person.** The reason we gather as Christians is always for worship but the occasions when we gather changes. No one preaches a Good Friday sermon on Christmas Eve but I know and have heard stories of some pastors who have one standard sermon they use for every funeral, some to the point where people in their congregation gain the ability to preach it themselves, usually while whispering in a back pew. Just as each of us is unique in the eyes of God, I am convinced that as preachers we are obligated to present that uniqueness before God in worship. So personal stories of faith and life are vital in the sermon as incarnational glimpses of the love of God and the presence of Christ among his people through and to this individual.
 - a. I believe it is important here to make the distinction between a funeral sermon and what is popularly called a eulogy. A eulogy, in my experience in the midwest and in Florida, is often included in the context of a Christian funeral service near the scripture readings and sermon. Usually done by one or more family members or friends, it is a recitation of the accomplishments and personal qualities of the deceased, often endearing, sometimes cringeworthy. My practice is to urge those to be shared in another setting, like a dinner or wake afterwards, and limit the family to a single speaker to bring greetings and thanks from the family. While that is not always the case, it threads the needle allowing the family to speak without a parade of speakers who can end up overshadowing and even contradicting the proclaimed gospel.

3. **Funeral services and sermons are pastoral care in action.** As a pastor, you are not providing a paid service or ceremony for a consumer to dictate terms. You are a disciple of Jesus Christ offering comfort and hope for the faithful and those searching for faith. Your relationships with members of your congregation should include open opportunities for funeral planning long before death and support of the bereaved after the funeral. For many years now, I have published a Funeral Planning Sheet every Lenten season in our congregational newsletter. As we consider the suffering and death of Jesus, it's also the right time to examine the reality of our own death in relation to our Lord. Just a simple form, people are asked to fill out simple requests like hymns, songs, Bible readings, and so forth as well as any plans made with a local funeral home. After its completion, members bring it to the church office where we place it in a special file and make as many copies as they like for their family and funeral director. Sooner or later all pastors leave a congregation, so these completed forms become a valuable resource for a sermon hook for even the most recently arrived pastor.
- a. Likewise, I have made it my custom to visit a bereaved spouse about six months after the funeral, about the time when family and friends assume they have "moved on" with life, when in fact the reality of the loss is often most poignant. I take them out to lunch, wherever they want to go and whatever they want to have to eat, drink, and talk about life and faith. One of the most memorable was with ninety-two-year-old Ben after the death of his wife of the same age. He chose one of our local chain restaurants that they frequented every Saturday night and always with the same order: Manhattans for cocktails with fish and chips for dinner. So, we went out for lunch, placed our order for fish and

chips, and then with our rye Manhattans toasted our wives who made us better men. We talked about faith and family, hope and heaven, and a year later, I shared this “hook” at his funeral, a celebration of his inheriting eternal life with his beloved who had gone before.

4. **Talk with the family and friends.** This would seem obvious, but it is amazing how many pastors do not take the time to really talk to those who are grieving. Contrary to popular belief, you really don’t need to know the deceased to preach at their funeral but you do need to know something about them. If you watch what happens at visitation and funeral meals, you discover the power of storytelling, particular in moments of loss. No one recounts the list of hobbies like golf or needlepoint but instead they tell the stories about the time Uncle Harold hit a hole in one or when Grandma did a framed needle point for cousin Sue’s wedding and mistakenly stitched her first husband’s name (true story). The hook, in the hook and hope method, is storytelling, specifically, the power of one personal story to connect to the gospel story. People don’t want to hear an obituary of facts about a person because statistics say nothing about who they really were. In thirty minutes at the funeral director’s office and an hour at visitation, you will discover and overhear stories that will reveal who the person really was, what they were most remembered for, and images of faith that you can hang your funeral sermon on. With the right story as your hook, you can make a personal connection with the deceased and their faith that will convince those in attendance you knew the person well. That connection through story is deeply reassuring to the grieving and a doorway back to faith.

- a. One of the motivators in writing this book has been what my wife and I affectionately call my “funeral groupies.” In congregations in the north where funerals with burials outnumber cremations, it is very common for women’s groups or another group of volunteers to prepare a meal for the family and friends after the visit to the cemetery. During the actual funeral they are often busy in the kitchen preparing the food and setting the tables but some will come in and listen, particularly if they knew the deceased well. When it became obvious that I spent time with the grieving families and took the time to learn stories of faith and life for people I did not know and yet shared them in meaningful ways in my sermons. More and more would stop to come listen to see “what Pastor Tom would do this time” and share their delight on the often-unique ways I would share a personalized gospel message. Their surprise that such things were not often taught or heard from other pastors led to their encouragement to share my approach with others. It seems obvious but it is taking the time to listen and learn stories that will make you a better preacher for any occasion.
5. **Remember you are proclaiming the good news of Jesus to the living.** Some of the poorest funeral sermons I have ever heard ended up as a eulogy lifting up the deceased as a paragon of faith or if it was an unchurched person, an attempt to preach them and the listeners out of certain damnation. Neither one is effective, in my opinion. Eulogies on the merits of the dead are fine for funeral dinners and wakes but really have no place in worship because the deceased then takes center stage and the highest honor, not God. Evangelistic sermons usually misfire because a casket gets in the way of an altar call and they tend to focus on God’s judgment and

your personal decision to be saved from damnation rather than a gracious God victorious over death and the grave through the death and resurrection of Jesus. No one comes to a funeral looking to be threatened by God — they come looking for hope in grief and good news for living now.

- a. I remember one time when I was asked by a congregational member to accompany her to a funeral down the street at the Pentecostal church she grew up in. Having become Lutheran when she married, she thought I might find their style of funeral service interesting but also the deceased had once belonged to our congregation before remarriage, then joining his new wife at her lifelong congregation. Inside the full sanctuary that wrapped fan shaped around the altarless stage, was the open casket (not something done in my Lutheran tradition), with the deceased on full display surrounded by sprays of flowers and gifts from friends and family. When it came time for the funeral sermon, the preacher quickly moved to the point that since George was not regular in his attendance and had never verbalized a saving decision in Jesus as his personal Lord and Savior, his eternal salvation was in question. Moving from the pulpit to beside the open casket, the pastor offered to his affirming members and horrified visitors, that that day they could have eternal certainty if they came up to the altar beside poor old George and prayed the Sinners' Prayer. And people came up to recommit as the rest of us waited in great discomfort. So that day, some of the living were convinced of their heavenly home and others worried that George was lost forever in hell. After the service, my member smiled at me the parking lot and said, "And now you know why I am a Lutheran that believes in God's grace."

If you take all these things into consideration, spreading them out on the workbench of your mind or the screen of your computer, I assure you a hook will emerge, a story or image that incarnates the power of God in Jesus Christ to the living through the personal life of the deceased. It is my conviction that it is only in stories do we glimpse the heart and soul of a person and the power of relationships in their lives, including their relationship with God.

The Bible sits at the heart of the Christian faith and I do not believe is a book of rules and doctrine at its core. I would argue that the Bible is a love story between God and humanity, God's unique creation in the midst of the world. From Adam and Eve to Abraham to Moses and the children of Israel to Jesus Christ and the Apostolic Church, the Bible is filled with faith stories of faith and broken promises, of families bound together and fractures, of God the fisher of hook and hope for his sinful and redeemed people in live, in death, and in new life. Our God is an incarnational God, a God who has not only taken on flesh and blood in Jesus but still comes and lives among us in the flesh and blood of our daily lives and its stories.

Taking the lead from Jesus, take the time to collect stories about the deceased from those that loved and knew them best, to find your hook. Ask questions about first meetings as friend or spouse and then draw out the significant stories that follow: wedding days; birth of children; shared service at work or the military. If they were parents, ask the children about their memories of Mom or Dad, the stories they would tell people who didn't know them or their most treasured moments. If they were active in the congregation you serve, even if it was only in the past, ask for those stories: confirmations, council meetings, social groups. If they are strangers or unchurched, search out hobbies, social groups, passions, and don't censor. Let the stories flow no matter how raw the telling.

Once you have your collection of possible personal stories to draw people in, search scripture to complete the hook. Start by asking the family for scripture readings, including if they

would like someone other than you read them in worship, if your tradition permits (Often new hooks will emerge as you learn the stories of these readers). Then let your heart and mind wander the whole of the Bible in light of these stories and how they might be revealed as stories of faith. Use Bible software for word searches and allow yourself the freedom to consider unusual or seemingly inappropriate connections at first. As you will see in the anthology, one scripture I have often used is that of the dying thief on the cross who asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom. Our first impulse might be to speak well of the dead and not compare Grandma to a justly condemned thief. But there is a powerful message of grace in that story to be remembered by a stranger, even when it is proclaimed by a pastor who was also a stranger to the deceased. If scripture is inspired by God, open yourself to be inspired by the whole of it.

To go back to our comparison to fly fishing, your hook is a story of the deceased that adorns a specific passage of scripture, that tied together grab the attention of those who will now hear it as gospel. Done well, not only will it draw them in from the coldness of the world in this moment, but this combination will also draw you into their life and grief. It will be unmistakable that you took the time to get to know them as people that visitors will come away thinking you personally knew deceased, both their life and faith, even though you made it clear otherwise.

The strange thing that I have discovered is a hook can always be found, even if the person was completely disconnected from Christianity, disliked by their community, or apparently lacking in any redeeming qualities. God is still present, God still speaks the story of faith into the most broken of lives to those who need hope in the face of sin, death, and the devil, as Martin Luther would say. Over the years and as you will see in the anthology, I have found a wide variety of hooks — personal stories and images unique to that person, that when connected to scripture, speak hope to gathered grieving people.