

# Introduction

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This brief introduction deals with some practical notes. The homilies in this book mostly reflect commentaries on the epistles and gospels (mostly gospels) from Years B and C in the lectionary, although Year A is also tapped. Almost all (ninety-seven percent) of the homilies are new, never before printed (except for the Twice Told Talks section: see below), and all are original. But that statement, that all are original, is not entirely true. I am inspired by a sentence from Walter Burghardt, a thought from Barbara Reid, and insights from William Willimon, James Wallace, John Shea, to name a few. I want to acknowledge their influence. A few homilies, however, have tapped into other past homilies of mine and have been reconfigured for this collection. In addition to the homilies reflecting the liturgical cycle, you will find what I hope is a helpful section of other homilies and related talks titled Holy Days, Holidays, and Occasions, which move outside the cycle and range from golden jubilee celebrations to a class reunion, and holy day and holiday celebrations. There is another section containing funeral homilies, which suggests several ways the preacher can confront the mystery of death.

Finally, there is a section with the strange title of Twice Told Talks. This is basically an emergency anthology of some of my previously printed seasonal homilies, many now out of print. These are not necessarily my best but are simply offered to provide an instant resource for those special occasions when the homilist is looking for material at an especially busy and tense time of the year and doesn't have much opportunity to pull his or her thoughts together. Dipping into this anthology may provide relief. Not a habit to be encouraged, but a help when help is needed.

However one uses this book, I caution that these homilies are not meant to be read front to back like a novel. Doing that makes them sound cramped and cranky. (That was my experience.) Remember also that they were written and delivered over a period of several years and so there will inevitably be some

overlap in thought and expression. I suggest that reading them out of the order they appear in the book may be more profitable.

For maximum effect it is wise to pay attention to the scriptural references at the beginning of each homily and read them before reading the homily. Also, referring to the comments and credits at the end of this book will round out the context behind each homily and remind you of the obvious, that the homilies are contextualized by the political and social climate of the time they were delivered and, although the essential insight and message will be valid, adjustments must be made to update the references. Needless to say, we must always remember that these homilies were preached and a great deal is lost by reading them. I especially think of the funeral homilies when my own emotions show through in the preaching—I knew and loved these people—and you simply can't put that on paper. Gestures, voice modulations, and especially pauses in the right places are also lost in the scribal translation, and, therefore, some of the soul. After all, homilies, like stories, poetry, and plays, are best performed. But here they are, all hundred plus of them.

Feel free to take the homilies as they are or modify them. Giving credit would be nice but not necessary. (Worth reading: "Stolen Goods" by Thomas G. Long in *Christian Century*, April 17, 2007, pp. 18ff.)

Finally, there's no escaping the unnerving finger-pointing every time you get up to preach. The words meant for others have a way of coming back to judge the one who spoke them. I just want to note that preaching is a dangerous occupation.

I went into church and sat on the velvet pew. I watched as the sun came shining through the stained-glass window. The minister, dressed in a velvet robe, opened the golden gilded Bible, marked it with a silk bookmark and said, "If any man will be my disciple, said Jesus, let him deny himself, take up his cross, sell what he has, give it to the poor and follow me." And I looked around and nobody was laughing.

I think this is from Kierkegaard. Ouch.