

My Preaching Debut

Certain vocational milestones stand out in my mind. There was the day my grade two teacher typed up my first story and told me I should be a writer someday. My first article published in the school newspaper.

The first time someone who did not know me in real life left a comment on my blog. The first time Rachel Held Evans shared one of my posts. The day I signed with an agent. The day I signed my book contract.

And now: the first time I preached in my home church on a Sunday morning.

(And yes, I'm purposely using the word "preach"—not the more acceptable words we women usually employ when we're at the front of a church: "sharing" or "talking," even "ministering" perhaps. *Preach*. It's a strong word, isn't it? I want to reclaim the word "preaching" for women and so, as usually happens, I needed to take a walk down the road I'm encouraging other women to take.)

I have spoken at a few women's events here and there, a couple of university class Q&As on writing or Christian feminism. And I love being with women; it's one of my favourite things, a comfort place for me now. Of course, I am always nervous and worried and over-prepared, and then I go and end up falling in love with another group of women who love Jesus and want to love well. Church basements are my happy place. In fact, this past Saturday, I spent time with Hillside Community Church's ladies, and they were so warm, so friendly, so real, I could have hugged them all (and I did, in fact, hug a good many of them).

So.

A few months ago, I met with our senior pastor, and he invited me to preach this past Sunday. I love our church's leadership team for many reasons, but our pastor gave me yet another reason in that meeting: He wanted to make sure I knew that I

didn't have to preach a Jesus Feminist kind of teaching message. If I wanted to, fine, great, go ahead with full support.

But here I did not have to earn or justify or teach my way into my place in that pulpit because of my sex. In my church, it is settled, it is done: The gifts of the Spirit are not gender-based, and he wanted me just to get up there and preach. So I did.

I wear all black when I'm nervous. It makes me feel stronger, like my voice and my face will earn the attention, not my wardrobe. So sure enough, on Sunday, I was in all black. I put on a leather bracelet from my friend Idelette's travels in Africa, and I wore my girls-with-swords necklace. It was the first time for my husband, Brian, to hear me preach. He is a great preacher, and I still feel like this is backward somehow—like he should be the one up there preaching while I sit in the front row. But here we are, and I think he's more excited and comfortable with this turn of our life than I am, to be honest.

I made it through. I only cried one time about how much I love Jesus. Okay, fine, two times. (Maybe three.) I still get so weepy when I try to talk about Jesus. He's so lovely to me. I preached about finding God in our everyday lives, about overcoming our evangelical hero complex, and how our lives as they stand right now are an offering before God.

After a bit of time talking with friends afterward, I came home and took off my black clothes and put on my grubby shorts. I went to my kitchen for a little food therapy: I made chocolate chip cookies and homemade pizza.

My son Joe had a fever, so I put him to bed for a nap with Evelyn while Brian and Anne ran a few errands to Canadian Tire. Annie lost another tooth yesterday morning and was busy writing multiple notes to the tooth fairy. Brian brought an iced caramel macchiato home for me, and we kissed in the kitchen.

He said, "You know, I was surprised how good it was. You did really good, Sarah." I knew what he meant and laughed. He was right. I was surprised how well it went too.

Sunday was terrifying because I am already so keenly aware of my inadequacies and failings, of all the ways that I am still in process, still so painfully in need of grace and kindness and transformation. And this is not a "congregation" or a "crowd"—this is my community. These are my friends. These are the people who have loved me back into intentional Christian community after my long period of disassociation with the institutions of the church.

These are the ones who show up in my living room to pray every other Thursday night. These are the ones who don't read my blog, but we nursed our babies together in the Mum Room and they teach my children in Sunday school and hug me close when I show up. These are the ones in my real, walking-around life. There is no "acting the spiritual hero" here—they are well aware of my achingly normal self.

And Sunday was affirming. I felt profoundly thankful that I am part of a community that celebrates the callings and work of each other. It made me feel like I have their full support, as if I am being sent out for the work of the gospel, as if I've got a big family behind me cheering me on, as if I'm not a lone voice but part of a great company.

I'm preaching now because my husband, my family, my friends and my community have identified this as a gift and calling in my life. I do not have a big desire to preach in the abstract. And yet I have had my moments—like when I get on stage and I start to talk and I feel like it's a conversation, like I see every single face and I sense both God's pleasure and each soul breathing. Sometimes it's like I'm on fire, and I want to start laying on hands and praying and prophesying, but I pace and I preach and I read Scripture, like I belong there somehow.

I don't for one moment want to be a preacher—not really. (And I'm not really good at it, not yet anyway. I have a lot to learn.) Instead, I want to be Sarah. I want to be God's

beloved one, to walk wherever He walks and follow the scent of His presence, discern where He's moving and move there.

And I want to keep telling stories about all the ways I see and experience and know His goodness in the world. Sometimes that looks like preaching on Sunday morning, sometimes that looks like blogging or writing a book, sometimes that looks like bathing my babies and tucking money under a little girls pillow with a note from the tooth fairy before I crawl back into bed with my husband, and then it's letting my sick little boy crawl into our bed at 1:30 in the morning and holding him close all night long while he snores in my hair.

It's all a proclamation.

Sarah Bessey *is a wife, mama of three tinies, a writer, popular blogger, and a happy-clappy Jesus lover. She lives in Abbotsford, British Columbia. Her first book, Jesus Feminist (Howard Books), has just been released.*