



# The Formation of a Preacher

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Listen my people,  
mark each word.  
I begin with a story,  
I speak of mysteries  
welling up from ancient depths,  
heard and known from our elders.  
We must not hide  
this story from our children  
but tell the mighty works  
and all the wonders of God.  
(Psalm 78:1-4)<sup>1</sup>

**I** TELL YOU THE WORKS AND WONDERS OF A WOMAN NAMED VIRGINIA, THROUGH whom I came to know the works and wonders of God. She served as the postmistress of the unincorporated village in which I was raised. When zip codes were as-

<sup>1</sup>Throughout this essay, Psalm 78 is quoted according to *The Psalter* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1995).

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*Preachers preach that they might live, but also their children and their children's children. Preachers have been shaped by the story, and they repeat the story that others might be shaped in the image of God.*

signed, our non-town received one, 98387, and Virginia was the mistress of this code. That was her work, but not one of her wonders.

Her first wonder was chocolate cake, made not only from scratch, but from *itch*, the longing that led to the scratch that produced the best cake in the world. It wasn't that I didn't know good chocolate cake. For the first nine years of my life we lived next door to Maxine Bingman, whose chocolate cake was unparalleled in the Malheur Valley of southeastern Oregon. Her secret was a cup of boiling water added to the batter at a critical point in the making. Our family took her recipe with us when we moved to western Washington to begin a mission congregation in 1962.

It was then and there that we met Virginia and learned that though Maxine Bingman had been a local legend, she was not a worker of wonders. Her chocolate cake could not stand up to Virginia's, whose secret was in the icing. Icing, even frosting, is too thin a word to describe what was, in fact, an entire batch of rich fudge spread atop the cake. Before the knife even reached the moist and tender cake it had to pass slowly, slowly through an inch of dense, dark fudge. Virginia did not share her recipe. Such a wonder is not replicated, for it was the love of Virginia that we received with each piece of cake.

Her second wonder was story-telling. All the stories she told were from the Bible. Every Sunday morning Virginia would lay an oval, braided rug on the tile floor of the fellowship room, gather the parish children around her, and tell the stories of our common life and faith. She held neither book nor Bible, her hands were empty, free to move. There was no need for pictures, the words were enough, words as rich and dark as fudge, as tender as cake, as alive as her love for us.

She told the story of creation, that time before time when God spoke light into darkness and hung stars and a moon and a sun in the sky like lanterns for our safety and delight. We were there under that enormous canopy, looking up past the sweep of her arm directly into the darkness at the moment the first light appeared. I saw creation's dawn at Virginia's telling. I also entered the ark with Noah and all the other children on the braided rug, crossed the sea on dry ground between watery walls, gathered manna six mornings a week, and was tempted, as surely as I am today, to gather more than I needed on the sixth day, struggling to trust God's promise to provide. The wonder of her story-telling continues to shape my seeing and believing and telling.

Why was Virginia so formative in my life? She loved children. This is irrefutable; you could taste it in her cake. In fact, she loved all kinds of children, even the squirmy or inattentive ones. Maybe she loved them best. You would have to ask my brother Douglas. He was the squirmiest of the four children in our family. Virginia made more chocolate cakes for him than for the rest of us.

She loved her Lord. This was clear even to a child, it simply showed everywhere. She cherished the stories and knew them by heart. She wrapped the stories around us and drew us into them until they were living in us and we were alive

within them. She told these ancient stories as if they were the present-tense, first-person-plural narratives of our lives, because that is exactly what they were for her. She wasn't the only one who shaped me with biblical story, but she took me where I had not been before, inside the mysteries welling up from ancient depths.

I met Virginia when I was nine years old, a "mature child." This is one way child development experts describe a person who has mastered the tasks of childhood—walking and talking, reading and writing, dressing, feeding, and bathing—and has yet to be assigned the tasks of adolescence. Competent at being a child, a nine- or ten-year-old dwells in possibility and willingly suspends disbelief. Such children are certain enough of their identity that they can enter story without the fear of losing themselves. They are not burdened by the incompetence and uncertainty that mark early adolescence or the cynicism and literalism that come a little later. They are not ready for the critical thinking possible for a "mature adolescent." In short, these are the children who can smell the hay and feel the heavy warmth of the tired donkey's flank when they enter the story of the Nativity.

Though I long ago ceased to dwell in childhood's possibility, I continue to learn from those who do. While serving my first parish, I always taught the nine- and ten-year-olds at vacation church school. I watched the eyes of the children while telling the stories, for sometimes in them I would glimpse the wonder of the first day dawning. I did not hide these mysteries from my own children, but wrapped my daughters in these stories from the day they were born. Now they, in turn, draw me into new ways of seeing.

We must not hide  
this story from our children,  
but tell the mighty works  
and all the wonders of God.  
The Lord gave precepts to Jacob,  
instructions to Israel,  
that the people before us  
could teach their children.  
(Psalm 78:4-5)

My father told stories, too, and he recited poetry. He and my mother attended school when memorizing poetry was standard fare. He would begin a poem, one word touching the next, one line flowing into another, couplets, quatrains spoken but nearly sung. He seemed to love the taste of the words in his mouth, dense, moist, chocolatey words, rich metaphors, delicate phrases, the tender turn of a single word on a double meaning that could make a child's eyes widen or water. If he faltered, my mother would offer the missing word, connecting the lines, refreshing memory, until the whole poem would be there in the air before us, full of more meaning than the words could hold, full of the love of my father. I tried to memorize poetry, but was never very able. Hymns were another matter.

Something about a text and tune well-wedded helps me remember both. The little mission my father planted grew into a singing church. The floor was linoleum tile. I had helped lay it, square by square. We sat on black, metal folding chairs. One whole wall of the sanctuary was windows, looking onto an oak grove, replete with squirrels and birds and ever changing leaves. The acoustics were as lively as a child's imagination as she watched squirrels chase one another leaping from limb to limb, tree to tree, all the while listening, truly listening, to the telling of the story and singing the hymns.

As children we called Thomas Williams's *Ebenezer* the Halloween song because, if sung slowly, it is shadowy and haunting and you can hear gremlins and goblins slipping through the triplets. Bernhardt Ingemann's text was my favorite: "Through the night of doubt and sorrow / Onward goes the pilgrim band,"<sup>2</sup> even though at that time I knew next to nothing about nights of doubt or sorrow. But a long night did come, a semester of nights in graduate school when doubt eclipsed faith and sorrow swallowed joy. There was no guiding light burning through the darkness, only chaos, peril, and terror.

Shivering, I sang that hymn, sitting alone on the floor of my drafty little house surrounded by the books of poetry I loved but could not remember. Then I began singing other hymns, one after another, wedding in my own body the texts and tunes that set the stories of my life like a seal upon my heart. I was not lifted magically from the night of doubt and sorrow, nor did light break as at that first dawning, but, as I sang, the chaos within began to take the shape of a choir. I could see the people rising from their black, metal, folding chairs to stand in the light dappled by oak leaves and to sing with me. In the night of my doubt, dense and dark, they surrounded me with song. While I was yet full of sorrow and fear, this pilgrim band reminded me of the cadence of our life together.

The cadences and content of preaching are not other than those of hymnody. Indeed, liturgy forms our seeing and believing, telling and living. My father knew the language of liturgy by heart, its poetry and rhythms, movements and mystery. From the intoning of the name of the Holy Trinity, which opened our hearts to worship, to the tracing of the sign of the cross in the air over our whole lives at the benediction, he invited us into the works and wonders of God. My mother opened our lips, quickened my memory, and wedded text and tune from the organ bench. We connected the lines one to another by our responses, sang the songs of our ancestors, dwelt in the possibilities of God's reign proclaimed, and tasted the self-giving love of Jesus in bread and wine until the whole of worship would be there, the very air we breathed.

The liturgies of the church form a people to trust in God, to trust the words and rhythms and movements of God, to stand in awe at all the wonders of God, to cherish the word and live according to it. The mysteries of worship, welling up

<sup>2</sup>Bernhardt Severin Ingemann, "Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow," in *The Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), hymn 355.

from ancient depths, have been shaping the imaginations and memories of preachers for generations, forming them along with all the faithful to tell the mighty acts of God and serve the world in Jesus' name.

Let future generations learn  
and let them grow up to trust in God,  
remembering great deeds, cherishing the law.  
(Psalm 78:8-7)

All manner of people lived in our non-town. Some lived in lovely homes with lawns that sloped toward the lake where their boats were moored to their swimming docks. Others lived in drafty houses surrounded by electric fences to keep the chickens and the goats in the yard. There were young soldiers stationed at the nearby army base, driving shiny new cars with out-of-state license plates, and even younger women raising small children alone in clapboard houses, having been left behind when their young soldiers were transferred. Because the area was semi-rural and unincorporated, there were no zoning laws and all these people were mixed up together, living side by side.

The street our parsonage faced was called Garbage Dump Road, indicating its final destination. But this road also bordered a forest, deep and dark, where wild boars roamed and a child's imagination flourished. Farther down there was a stock-car race-track, across from which were clusters of little trailer houses that sprouted multiple lean-to additions like large lichen on little logs. Between our home and the trailers were Mrs. Stintson's house that smelled of cats and old newspapers, and a secluded estate, complete with tennis court and swimming pool, said to have been built by a millionaire for his paramour.

My father knew most of these people and had been in many of their homes. Some he met because he was a pastor and they were all mixed together in our church. The choir that stood to sing with me during my first long night of doubt and sorrow, and every such night that followed, included both Stella, who lived by the lake and wore the only mink coat I have ever touched, and Rose Stintson, who carried the smell of her cats wherever she went. Rose's cows grazed on church property next to the parsonage, feasting on lawn clippings thrown over the fence while Rose, Stella, Virginia, and I feasted together at the table of grace.

My father met other neighbors because he was a volunteer fire fighter. Some he brought to our home because they needed a safe place until their father was sober or their mother out of jail. Some came to our door even though they did not gather with us to sing in the dappled light or feast at the table. Someone, somewhere had wrapped them in the story of God's deepest love revealed in Jesus. For they trusted that wherever lived one who told the stories of God's compassion, there they would be received and offered the sturdy ark, dry ground for safe passage, or unearned manna they needed for life. And that is what they received.

My father knew many of the people in our non-town, but Virginia knew them all. She was mistress of their post office and gracious host to all who came

through the door. She watched out for them, noticing when someone's post-office box was filling with uncollected mail. Was he sick? Did she need help? She treated children who came to buy stamps with the same loving kindness she showed us on Sunday mornings. You knew, even when she was at work, that she was a woman of wonders. In her presence, any child who had eaten her chocolate cake could smell both the memory of the last piece and the hope of the next.

I believe that children who had never tasted her cake could smell this, too, perhaps only faintly: the fragrance of some unnamed wonder, deep and mysterious, tender and moist and filled with love. It is a fact that children who had never sat on the braided rug in the fellowship room of Spanaway Lutheran Church could enter the wonder of the stories she told. They were audible in the way she spoke to people who came to send a parcel, visible in the smile she bestowed like a blessing on those she served. Not only did the stories live in her, not only was she alive in them, but she lived the stories she told. They shaped her seeing and believing, her telling and living.

Not like their ancestors,  
stubborn, bitter, wavering,  
unfaithful to God;  
They forgot all God had done,  
wonders revealed to them.  
Yet God, in compassion,...  
forgave their sin.  
God remembered their weakness,  
flesh as fragile as breath.  
(Psalm 78:8, 11, 38, 39)

Like her ancestors before her, Virginia surely was stubborn, wavering, and unfaithful to God. If she hadn't been, she could not have told the story of the prodigal the way I heard her tell it. But when she forgot the wonders revealed to her, God, in compassion, forgave her, remembering her weakness. God surrounded her with song, a whole choir rising up to sing with her, and I and the other parish children numbered among them. God sent storytellers, including my father, to speak again to her of mysteries welling up from ancient depths. And God fed her with manna: the bread of life, the cup of salvation.

Virginia and my parents were not the only elders who invited me into the mystery of God's compassion for the frail and forgetful. Nor were they the only ones who planted in me a passion for telling the ancient and ever new story of God's love for us. There was (and is) a host of such people, people whom I could never thank enough for not hiding this story from me. My gratitude is best expressed by doing for others what they have done for me: telling the next generation what I have heard and known from my elders, and helping them teach their young.

I long to speak as I was spoken to, in words they can understand, words that slip into the heart, unlock the imagination, and quicken memory, words that evoke a faithful way of living. Preachers ask so much of words. They, like we, are as fragile

as breath. They fairly burst at the seams for the meaning we bid them bear. So we wed them to music. We wrap them in gesture and sign. We speak them slowly, tenderly, turning a single word on a double meaning. We fairly shout them, pounding with rhythm, creating the cadences of our life together. We set words too close to one another, hoping that in their touching, enough friction will be created to flint a spark. We risk everything, including being foolish, in order that this story be told.

I knew at a young age why Ezekiel ate the scroll and was filled with delight. God's word was his life, and he knew he could not live until he had taken in what God had given. Only then could God's gift be made manifest in his living. We taste the words as we preach, sometimes bitter as chocolate with no sugar, sometimes sweet beyond belief, but always it is God's love we receive. We preach that we might live. We preach for the sake of our children's children, that they may grow up to taste God's goodness and trust God's love.

We must not hide  
this story from our children.  
Let future generations learn  
and let them grow up  
to teach their young  
to trust in God.

(Psalm 78:4, 6, 7a) ⊕