

Pulpit Accidents (2015)

Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner, WLRH Radio Huntsville, AL USA

Among the unappreciated perils of being a religious leader are the unexpected occurrences that happen when one is engaged in conducting public worship. When you get well enough acquainted with your neighborhood priest or preacher, rabbi or imam, ask them about the time that something happened they didn't expect that created some consternation among their flock.

For me, during the years I have had a number of times during the years when a passage of the Bible just disappeared while I was preparing to read it. Happens mostly when I don't have a book-mark inserted at the right spot, and when the Bible has pretty small print. So I announce the reading, "Psalm 100, verses 1 through 5," and start thumbing through the pages, but it's just not there. Some scoundrel has expunged that particular passage; there are lots of other passages, but not that one. You hem and haw, and fill the blank time best you can, "This is a wonderful passage, a favorite, known by all, just remarkable..." but it's gone. Somehow it shows up, and you can start reading with a newfound sincere appreciation.

I have a Baptist friend who told of his very first immersion ceremony, where the person is ducked completely under the water. He had a beautiful white pulpit robe he had secured for the service. He led the candidate down into the baptismal pool, carried out the ceremony, then led the person up onto dry land. What he did not calculate was the effect of all that water on the pristine robe, which became virtually transparent, and everyone learned about his taste in colorful undergarb.

My favorite tale of such mishaps, however, concerns another friend who led worship for years and years, and knew how to do it all too well. They came to the time in the ceremony where the service leaflet called for leading the prayer that Jesus taught his friends to say. Now understand, he'd done this plenty of times both before and after his ordination, knew it well, couldn't miss. But when the time came, here came a totally unexpected memory block, so what he actually said was, "And now we join in prayer: I pledge allegiance to the flag..." and there he was.

You know, I think God understands that.

The Rev. Houston Hodges is mostly retired, but still preaches some at Big Cove Presbyterian Church in Hampton Cove.