



Intro: You're listening to Crossings Conversations from Church Divinity School of the Pacific, a show about leaders creating Christian community and sharing God's love.

Kyle Oliver: This is Kyle Oliver from Church Divinity School of the Pacific and I'm here with the Reverend Dr. Lisa Cressman, founding steward of Backstory Preaching. Lisa, welcome.

Lisa Cressman: Thank you, Kyle. I'm delighted to be here.

Kyle: Thank you so much for being with us. This is a series of interviews with CDSP alums who are up to interesting things in their life and ministry. Remind me what your graduating year was?

Lisa: 1992, a long time ago.

Kyle: [chuckles] Well, thanks for being here to represent the class of '92. We'll start pretty broadly, just tell us a little bit about your ministry with Backstory Preaching?

Lisa: Thank you, Kyle. I hate to tell everybody who's listening, but I have the best ministry gig on the planet. It is mine and I am not giving it up [chuckling] because all I do is work with preachers, lay and ordained preachers. I started Backstory Preaching in 2016 and it is now my privilege to work with ecumenical preachers around the world. I have a great time doing it because I get to help them preach the good news in a way that is more effective and authentic and it's pretty great.

Kyle: Very cool. How do you get connected with the folks that you're working with?

Lisa: Well, we started with a small proof of concept startup grant that was very generously given by the Episcopal Diocese of Texas. I now live in the Houston, Texas Metro though I am canonically resident in Minnesota, which is its own story, but Texas was very generous in giving me this grant. We started with what is still our flagship. We

run a year-long intensive mentorship. The idea of what we do is we are as invested in the preacher as we are their preaching. We are simultaneously working on helping preachers develop their craft to preach more skillfully. We do so in a manner though that is at least as much spiritual direction, as it is based on developing skills.

Everything else that we do has grown up as a result of the mentorship including a lot of-- a blog that I write every week geared toward preachers to year-round support that we offer to make the preaching craft and process run more smoothly and be sustainable. One of the first things that we did for example is create an independent e-course and a lot of other free resources on "Craft an Effective Sermon by Friday," by Friday being the optimal words here. We help preachers learn how to craft their sermons, to get them done on their own schedules so it's not spilling over into personal lives all the time.

Kyle: I'm a long time reader of your blog and follower of your work and certainly one of the things that's resonated with me as someone who preaches not every week, at least not at the moment, but has occasionally preached every week for seasons and still preach pretty often, is the notion-- you mentioned that at least part of what you do is spiritual direction, and I've always been struck by the sense that building preaching and the associated prep work into one spiritual practice is part of, I think, how that Friday target system works. Can you say a little more about that?

Lisa: Yes. Back in the day, it was-- in the Water, though it was not taught to me this way specifically, but the understanding that what preachers needed to do was to get out of the way of the text. That we were to present the text in its purest form, in as unbiased a way as we can, and while understanding the context of the text is still critically important, it seems to me that preachers can't get out of the way of the text. If the text is incarnated into the particularity of the human person, then we are going to be getting in the way of the text in a way that simply can't be avoided. In fact, our whole being goes with us into the pulpit.

One of the things we talk about at Backstory Preaching is preaching is your life, your life is preaching because it's all of our experience, all of our education, all of our formation, our understanding of the text, the context that we are in, the people with whom we are offering the gospel, all of that is informing how we understand the text. Rather than trying to get out of the way of it, what we're trying to do is exploit who we are, not in an icky sense of that word, but in the sense of, with all that I am and all that I have, we honor God in the gospel by bringing our entire selves to the preaching event. So what we want to be doing is offering the self God made us to be in that offering.

The spirituality of who we are and our relationship with God is absolutely central. It is key to how we are preaching. That's not the same thing at all, that we are preaching personal stories. We're not using the word I and telling our own stories. It is rather that our self is being a part, is being built into the sermon in a way that it can't be extracted.

That's why you can get 10 preachers with the same text for the same congregation on the same Sunday are going to preach 10 different sermons because of who we are.

We try to help preachers tap into who are you and who are you bringing to the text and honoring that unique voice that gets one time in all of history to be brought to the table and so use that and make it the best it can possibly be in service of the gospel and the people we serve.

Kyle: That's a beautiful vision. Stop me if I'm wandering into trade secrets here, but if I, Kyle, in my particularity and incarnate reality wake up on Monday morning and know that I'm preaching on Sunday and I'd like to be done by Friday, in the methodological framework that you're working in, where do I start and how is that connected to my incarnate spiritual life?

Lisa: Great. No, this is not at all getting into trade secrets, this is what we do all the time. We apply *Lectio Divina* to sermon prep and *Lectio Divina* as most listeners will know, has four stages to it, *Lectio Meditatio*, *Oratio*, and *Contemplatio*. Those four stages are beautifully applicable to sermon prep. There is first of all, an attitude, a preparation of self that sermon prep is actually a prayerful event.

In that way, it is in and of itself, it is a spiritual practice that feeds the preacher. It is not only for our listeners, it's because we're children of God encountering the text. When we do so prayerfully and thoughtfully, we are fed by sermon prep rather than drained by it. We start with *Lectio* which means to read. One of the things we offer at Backstory Preaching every Monday at noon central on the Backstory Preaching Facebook page, we pray the gospel in community, and so we are praying the coming Sunday's gospel together using the *Lectio* part of *Lectio Divina*, a slow careful reading of the text.

Then we advocate the second stage of *meditatio*, and that's most closely akin to exegesis, but it is rather than being only informed by our study, we talk about it as formative exegesis so that it is forming the preacher as a child of God. We are being changed because all of scripture is about forming us as a people of God, so we allow a vulnerability in ourselves to be changed by, transformed by, become more like Christ by what we are studying.

Then *oratio*, the next stage, is the application. To take all of this stuff that you've learned, and with a particular process that I developed, I help people, or preachers do on their own, discern one clear message of good news, just one. One, one, only one, one, one clear message of good news.

Kyle: This is an audio-only format, but you would see me cringing, thinking back on all those failures to get to one.

Lisa: Just one. So I help people figure out how do you get to that one message? Then, you craft the sermon in whatever the thing is that you do. Manuscript, notes, without, it doesn't matter, so that by Thursday or Friday depending on your schedule, you've got

the sermon done. You can let it rest. *Contemplatio* was happening throughout the week—you give it rest breaks in between, which is when the spirit and creativity have the greatest opportunity to work—and then you're done. Kyle, I literally hear from clergy spouses because they're having date nights on Friday and Saturday nights because the sermons are done.

The entire stress level of the household has dropped, and the preachers are really excited about what they're preaching because they've been transformed themselves by the good news. Now, they're really jazzed about "I get to preach, I get to tell you. Let me share with you this cool thing that just happened. This good news I know because I just experienced it." They're really excited to preach, and when they're excited, then that transforms the congregation. They're excited to hear what the preacher has to say, and it's a beautiful circle. It just keeps feeding on itself that way.

Kyle: Good news all around.

Lisa: Yes, exactly. Exactly, yes. Rather than it being a box on the checklist, one more thing you've got to do in the course of your week, it's a sense of "I get to do this. I get to preach. I get to be sent to scripture on behalf of my congregation." Who's got a better job than that, except mine of course?

Kyle: [chuckles] Fair enough. Fair enough. Let's continue a bit with that theme of formation. I don't think I'm putting words in your mouth. I think I've heard you say this, that you felt like your training for ministry at CDSP has shaped and formed your outlook at doing this ministry. I wonder if you might say a little bit more about that?

Lisa: Yes, at the risk of people thinking that this might be sort of a play-up because I'm being interviewed, it isn't. I was there from '89 to '92. The faculty was stellar. I don't doubt that it still is. I can only speak to-- I know the faculty I got to work with was amazing, and being able to be a part of the GTU and take classes from a number of schools, being around ecumenical peers. When I was there, they were in a search for the new homiletics professor. I actually took homiletics with the Dominicans, which was a great experience. In addition, the very first earthquake I ever had was the Loma Prieta earthquake, the one that happened during the World Series.

Kyle: So your first semester of seminary?

Lisa: Yes.

Kyle: Wow.

Lisa: I felt, "Wow, this is what you people do all the time?" Then I learned of course pretty quickly, this was an unusual event. I was also there for the civil riots, with the Rodney King verdict. I was also there for the Oakland Berkeley Hills fire.

Kyle: Wow.

Lisa: And I did feel field ed campus ministry at Cal Berkeley and the Reverend Steve Brandon was my field ed supervisor and with him and a couple of other students, we traveled to El Salvador during their civil war. I was there in November of '91 to commemorate the martyrdom of the six Jesuit priests and their housekeeper and her daughter. The combination of those things, I am amazed at the parallels now about 30 years later that are quite shocking.

Between climate change, and wildfires, and hurricanes, with the civil rights protests, with Black Lives Matter. The courage that it takes to stand up to those who are oppressing others, the prayers of the community. I'll never forget when we were leaving to go to El Salvador and there was a prayer service that was held for us because it was dangerous and scary to go to El Salvador in the middle of a civil war.

The way that the community surrounded us with prayer, the exhibition of care around the earthquake, there were students who were on the Oakland Berkeley Bridge when it collapsed. They barely got away with it. To see-- going up into the-- after the Oakland Berkeley Hills fire, and helping an elderly woman who had lost everything in the house, and working with students to find what few belongings she could still claim.

The formation of education, the spirituality of the daily services, serving as a cantor which I loved being able to do, and witnessing to a world that was broken in all kinds of ways, it couldn't have set me up better. I really feel all these years later, if I had designed a seminary curriculum and experience, I would have designed the one I got. It was extraordinary and I've always been so grateful.

Kyle: That sense as you said earlier of our whole lives being the curriculum, and sense being what forms us, and being the intermediary of our ministry really just leaps off of your testimony.

Lisa: Yes, yes, yes.

Kyle: I'm mindful of the time here. Let's turn to a question that we always want to ask. We don't usually ask at first and you can think of it in the specific context of CDSP or the more general context of formation more broadly, but what advice would you have for people thinking about formation generally, formation as preachers specifically? What advice would you have for-- what can make a difference for people preparing to preach here in 2021, 2022?

Lisa: That preaching is harder than we give it the resources to do well. A couple of things about this I think are important to appreciate. For most of us in seminary or local formation, when we do a preaching course-- like I got one semester which is very common, sometimes people get two.

Kyle: Yes, I think I had two.

Lisa: When we graduate, we are expected and we expect ourselves to be extraordinary preachers, but the equivalent of what we have done is we have brought somebody into a preaching course, we stuck a violin under their chin, put a bow in their hands, and said, "I want you to learn to be a premiere jazz fiddler who can riff your own music, compose your own stuff on the spot, play beautifully and in tune, and never ever again have another lesson."

That's the equivalency. Preaching is an extraordinarily complex art form and there has never been a mechanism, honestly before Backstory Preaching, to have a place to do that continual development that a skill like this requires. Anybody can learn to preach well, anybody can, but it requires intentional practice and feedback and resources and time. What happens for most preachers is they get into their ministry setting and neither preacher nor vestry especially, understand what it takes to preach well.

As more ministry things come out, preaching gets shoved into the corner and into nooks and crannies and people wonder why preachers struggle to preach well, to preach effectively. Preaching is not our volunteer job. It is a primary and central focus, and more so now than ever because we're online, and preaching is the public face of what people learn about the gospel.

Not only is all of the preacher going into that sermon, it is the ministry context. Everything gets funneled through the sermon, everything. So it deserves and it needs the time, whatever the preacher says they need, they need the resources to learn and grow to get the feedback they need so that they can develop into the preacher everybody hopes and knows that preacher is capable of becoming. My advice is to appreciate how extraordinarily difficult this is and to devote the time and energy that good preaching actually requires.

Kyle: Amen. Thank you for that. To close us out, I'd like to just invite you to testify, as it were, in whatever way you might feel called to in this moment, based on your experience at Backstory Preaching, what word would you have for other Christians, for other Episcopalians, about what you are learning, about the work that you do, or anything else? What would you want to share in closing?

Lisa: The world and the church are changing in ways that are deeper and faster than any of us have experienced in our lifetimes and maybe ever. We need to do lots of work to acknowledge and grieve what is passing so that we can rise to an Easter Sunday of whatever is coming ahead. It is not a time to be afraid of these changes. Yes, it's scary, and there's a reason Jesus keeps saying over and over again, "Do not be afraid." Because however things change, there is always new life, and while it may not be fun in the meantime, God is always present. So have good courage, new life is always, always here.

Kyle: Lisa, thank you for that word and thank you for being with us for this episode of *Crossings Conversations*. Most of all, thank you for what you do. We really are grateful for all of your sharing.

Lisa: Thank you, thank you Kyle, and thank you CDSP, and many blessings in all the years ahead.

Outro: Crossings Conversations is a co-productions of Church Divinity School of the Pacific and Trinity Church Wall Street. If you enjoyed the show, please rate and review it on Apple Podcasts or share it with a colleague. You can more about the only Episcopal seminary on the west coast and subscribe to Crossings Magazine at cdsp.edu