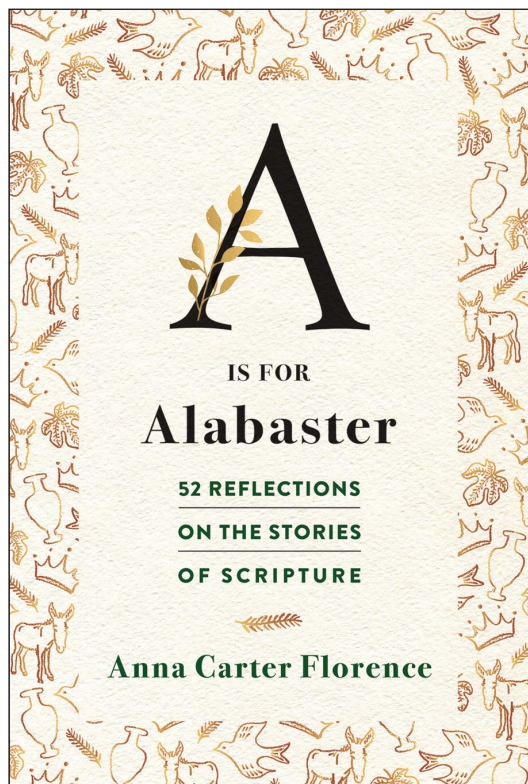


Reading *A Is for Alabaster* as a Preacher



This book was originally conceived as a book for preachers: words *to* and *about* us. The audience has been expanded, yet preachers who listen closely can still hear traces of those earlier drafts—and, I hope, a word for them. It might be a description of the preaching life and what it means to stand in this calling, or it might be a word of encouragement and empowerment to speak up and out, when the times demand. It might even be a reimagining of a biblical character or image as a preaching role model or guide.

Scripture has a lot to say about preaching and preachers. Reading the biblical text as a word *for preachers* can yield startling and even wondrous insights. I hope you'll detect some of those in your own readings of Scripture and—as best I could convey them—in this book, as well. My goal in *A Is for Alabaster* is to set a big table: to make the Bible, and *reading* the Bible, as open and accessible a feast as we know it can be. But for preachers who read between the lines, I hope you'll hear that you are, and always are, embedded into everything I write. This book started with you.

Five Ways a Preacher Might Read This Book

1. *Listen for the word to you . . . about preaching.* As a person who spends much of her time preaching to preachers (which is a homiletical subgenre all its own), I am always on the lookout for the preacher in the text. By this, I mean that I'm always listening for what a text has to say *to preachers*—about the joys and challenges of what we do and who we are called to be. This hermeneutical lens requires a certain shift of perspective. *What if* we imagined this biblical character as a preacher? *What if* we imagined this biblical image in light of preaching? What wisdom might the text have for us, and what could we learn about ourselves and our calling? The early drafts of this book approached every biblical text this way. In some chapters, it's obvious (“H Is for Habakkuk” and “M Is for Mary Magdalene”), while in others, it's more muted (“F Is for Fish” and “C Is for Cornelius”). If you're a preacher yourself, you might begin there, with the preacher's version of “Where's Waldo?” by looking for the preacher in the text, as I did for each essay. Ask yourself the same *What if* . . . ? questions above. Is there a gift of wisdom in this chapter for me? What does this essay about this biblical character or image show me about the life and work of a preacher? What might I add, from my own reading of the text?

2. *Listen for the word to you . . . about reading Scripture for preaching.* I come from a tradition in which Scripture is central, and preaching begins with a close reading of the biblical text. The task is to read with care and compassion, freedom and precision—from a particular context, *for* a particular people. Every time. Again and again. And as every preacher knows, this kind of reading takes discipline and time, because the text is a strong interpretive partner. It demands our full attention. It requires our creative engagement.

Thankfully, Scripture has a lot to say about this, too: *how* preachers read the biblical text *for preaching*, and how this kind of reading is different from any other. Since my day job involves many hours spent reading Scripture with students (and many hours trying to loosen them up so they can hear the words afresh), I've become quite interested in how the text itself forms us, as readers—and you'll find this hermeneutic at work in several chapters, as well. Some describe what we bring to the text as readers (“G Is for Goliath,” “X Is *in* Ax”); others point to particular reading strategies (“J Is for Joseph,” “Y Is for Yeast”). Ask yourself: Are there any new perspectives or ideas, here, that might strengthen my own practice of Scripture reading? What might I add from my own reading of this biblical text?

3. *Listen for the particular approach to this text.* Preachers are always learning from how other preachers preach—or at least, that's true for me. It can be great fun to take a step back and parse out a sermon, investigating all its inner workings for what it might have to teach: a new interpretive angle, say, or an unexpected rhetorical strategy, or a different perspective gleaned from an intersectional reading of the text. So if a particular sermon speaks to me, it's always valuable for me to stop and ask why. What can I learn about my own life and practice, from the way this preacher approached this text? What do I need to take up or let go, in order to hear the text in this key? If you're a preacher, you might want to read each chapter in this vein, allowing the Spirit to be your teacher. I'm not claiming to have written a definitive word, here; I'm inviting you to sit down with me in a circle of preachers, and enter a conversation about what the biblical approach to a chapter may have evoked for you.

4. *Listen for the word to you and your faith community.* This book was written to be read, not preached—but the writing may sound like a sermon, at times. If you like sermons (especially sermons that someone else had to prepare, instead of you), you might listen for those chapters that sound like they might be a sermon for you and your faith community. And when those moments come, I hope you'll hear them in a pastoral tone—that is, not as a sermonic slam or denouncement (“No, no; bad dog!”) or a smarmy critique (“You should know better!”), but as a word of hope from a traveling companion, whose turn it was to say something true today, with love. After all, we can't preach to people we don't love; otherwise, we're just correcting them. (And after years in this calling, I can't help it: I love preachers.)

5. *Listen for the Spirit moving in this text, with a word for your faith community that will be yours to say.* Preachers look for inspiration everywhere. We have to; this is all-consuming work. So if Jacob's ladder to heaven suddenly appears to you in the middle of a chapter (or a dream), I hope you'll take it as a gift of the Spirit, and turn aside to look. Follow it all the way up and back. Take off your shoes. Wrestle for the blessing that's yours to preach. Wrestle for your life, like Jacob the God-Fighter (“I Is for Israel”). Even if it takes all night, and you're not even sure who your wrestling partner is—or what this blessing will be. Because in the end, that's what a preacher is: a person who will stay up all night to embrace a stranger who might be God.

Go with God's peace and the blessings of your preaching colleagues.