TRAINING GUIDE FOR RULING ELDERS:
PREACHING IN A PINCH

Imagine This... It's Saturday evening, you've just settled in with your favorite book or show, and the phone rings. It's the pastor's spouse letting you know that the pastor is sick and won't be in worship tomorrow. As a ruling elder, they are reaching out to you. What do you do?

How do you feel when you imagine being asked to preach on short notice? What goes through your mind?

Preaching in a pinch may sound daunting, but with some tools, a clear process, and trust in the Holy Spirit, you can faithfully proclaim God's Word even when you don't feel ready.

Remember: Preaching in a pinch isn't about perfection, it's about faithfulness. Preaching in a pinch is about being present and letting God's Word speak. Trust that you are not alone. The Spirit of God will be at work through your preparation and through you.

Book of Order, W-2.0303
"Ruling elders are called to nurture the common life of the people of God through their gifts of discernment and governance. ***They should also cultivate an ability to teach the Word when called upon to do so.*** When appropriately prepared and commissioned by the presbytery, ruling elders may proclaim the Word and administer the Sacraments in a particular congregation (G-2.1001)."

NINE STEPS TO CRAFTING AND PREACHING A FAITHFUL SERMON

- ☐ **1. Pause and Pray**
- ☐ **2. Select a Scripture Passage**
- ☐ **3. Read the Text Over and Over**
- ☐ **4. Pay Attention to What You Notice and Jot Down Your Thoughts**
- ☐ **5. Reflect on the Text and Ask Important Questions**
- ☐ **6. Consult Resources**
- ☐ **7. Organize Your Thoughts and Prepare a Rough Draft**
- ☐ **8. Write Your Opening and Closing**
- ☐ **9. Print and Practice**

1. Pause and Pray
Before you begin to prepare anything, pause and pray. Preaching is not simply about crafting words—it's about listening for God's Word to speak through you. Ask the Holy Spirit for calm, focus, and guidance. Pray for the congregation who will hear the message, for insight to understand the text, and for a heart that is open to what God wants to say. Beginning with prayer centers your preparation in faith rather than fear and reminds you that you are not doing this work alone.

2. Select a Scripture Passage
When you're asked to preach on short notice, choosing a text quickly is essential. Start by asking which scripture readings have been selected for Sunday worship. If unavailable, look to the lectionary, which provides Scripture readings for each Sunday and ensures your sermon connects with the rhythm of the church year. If the lectionary is unavailable or unfamiliar, choose a passage you know well—perhaps a favorite Psalm, a familiar Gospel story, or a short, clear narrative that speaks to God's character and God's work in the world. You might also select a text that fits the occasion, such as a story of hope for a time of grief or a teaching about generosity during a stewardship moment. The goal is to find a passage that is both meaningful to you and accessible to the congregation, so that the Word can speak faithfully through your preparation.

3. Read the Text Over and Over
Before preaching, it's essential to read your chosen Scripture several times, slowly and attentively. Each reading allows the words, images, and rhythms of the passage to indwell you, helping it sink beneath the surface so that you begin to think, feel, and even pray with the text. The goal is to know the passage forwards and backwards—to recognize key phrases, notice repetitions, and catch subtleties you might otherwise miss. This familiarity not only builds confidence but also allows the Spirit to speak through you naturally, so that when you stand before the congregation, you are not merely delivering words on a page, but proclaiming a living Word that you have absorbed and internalized.

4. Pay Attention to What You Notice and Jot Down Your Thoughts
As you read and reread the Scripture, pay careful attention to the words, images, and details that catch your eye or stir a response in you. Notice what surprises you, what confuses you, or what resonates deeply. These moments of recognition are often the threads that lead to the heart of the sermon—they reveal what the Spirit may be highlighting for you and for the congregation. By observing your own reactions and reflections, you begin to uncover the layers of meaning in the passage and discover how it speaks to both God's character and our lives. Attentive reading turns the text from something you study into something that speaks through you, guiding the message you will share.

5. Reflect on the Text and Ask Important Questions
Once you've read the passage carefully and noticed what stands out, the next step is to ask thoughtful questions that help uncover its meaning and relevance. By engaging the passage with these questions, you move beyond observation into interpretation, allowing the Scripture to guide the sermon and shape the message you will share with the congregation.

Here are some key questions to consider:

- What words or images stand out to me?
- What surprises or confuses me?
- What does this passage teach **about God**?
- What does it teach **about humanity**?
- What does it teach **about our relationship with God and one another**?
- What good news does it proclaim?
- What challenge does it bring?
- Where is Christ in this passage?

6. Consult Resources
After you have carefully engaged the text—reading it several times, recording your initial observations, and asking key interpretive questions—you may find it helpful to consult trusted resources to deepen your understanding and gather additional insight. Commentaries can provide historical context, theological interpretation, and scholarly perspectives that enrich your reading. Online tools such as A Sermon for Every Sunday, Working Preacher, and Day One offer practical reflections, sermon ideas, and illustrative material that can spark your creativity. The key is to approach these resources ***after*** you have wrestled with the text yourself, so that they supplement rather than replace your own encounter with Scripture and the message God is calling you to share.

7. Organize Your Thoughts and Prepare a Rough Draft
After reading, reflecting, and praying over the Scripture, it's time to gather your insights and shape them into a message the congregation can follow. Start by reviewing your notes—what themes or ideas rise to the surface? Choose one central message that captures what you believe God is saying through this text. Then, organize your thoughts in a way that naturally leads listeners from curiosity to understanding, from understanding to faith. Write in your own voice, as if you were speaking directly to your congregation, using short, clear

sentences that sound natural when spoken aloud. Don't try to say everything the passage could mean—focus on what the Spirit has impressed upon you.

A clear and simple structure helps keep the message focused:

- **Introduction** – Open with a story, question, or image that draws people in.
- **Exploring the Text** – Explain what is happening in the Scripture.
- **Connecting Today** – Show how the passage speaks to our current lives.
- **Good News & Hope** – Remind the congregation of God's grace revealed in Jesus Christ.
- **Conclusion** – Summarize the message clearly and offer a call to faith or action.

For a 9 to 12-minute sermon:

- **Word count:** about 1,200–1,600 words.
- **Page count:** around 7–9 pages (size 18 pt. Calibri font, 1 ½ spaced).

8. Write Your Opening and Closing

The way you begin a sermon sets the tone for the entire message and invites the congregation into the story you are about to tell. A strong opening captures attention, sparks curiosity, and helps listeners connect with the Scripture. While there are many ways to begin, seven particularly effective approaches include using a story, asking a question, painting a vivid image, sharing a surprising fact, incorporating humor, tying the text to a current event or cultural reference, or beginning with a meaningful quote. Each of these strategies can help "hook" the congregation and prepare their hearts to hear God's Word.

Just as the opening of a sermon captures attention, the conclusion leaves the lasting impression. A strong conclusion doesn't simply stop—it gathers the sermon's main ideas, ties them back to the Scripture, and points clearly to the good news of God's love. The final words should offer hope, clarity, and a sense of "landing" so the congregation knows where the message has taken them. A good conclusion often restates the central point in fresh language, provides a memorable image or phrase to carry into the week, and ends on a note of encouragement, challenge, or invitation.

9. Print and Practice

Once your sermon is written, print it out in a format that's easy to read—large enough font (size 18 Calibri), narrow margins (1/2 inch), and plenty of spacing (1 ½ spaced) so your eyes can follow it smoothly from the pulpit. Hold the pages in your hands and practice reading them aloud. Speaking the words helps you find your natural rhythm and reveals where sentences might be too long or ideas unclear. Time yourself to be sure your sermon fits within the 9–12 minute range, and make small adjustments as needed. Practice pausing for emphasis, looking up occasionally, and speaking with warmth and confidence. Remember, you're not performing—you're sharing good news. The goal of practice is not perfection, but familiarity, so that when Sunday comes, you can proclaim the message with peace, clarity, and genuine faith.

ATTENTION GRABBING OPENINGS

- **Start with a Story** - A brief, vivid story (personal, biblical, or contemporary) grabs attention immediately. Example: *"When I was six years old, I tried to build a rocket ship out of a cardboard box and duct tape…"*
- **Ask a Question** - Draw the listener in by making them think about themselves. Example: *"Have you ever had one of those weeks where everything seemed to go wrong?"*
- **Use a Vivid Image or Scene** - Paint a picture that people can see in their minds. Example: *"Imagine walking into a crowded room, and every eye turns toward you. You're carrying something heavy, but no one offers to help…"*
- **Share a Surprising Fact or Statistic** - Unexpected information gets attention. Example: *"Did you know the average person spends four years of their life waiting in line?"*
- **Begin with Humor (Carefully)** - A light, appropriate joke or humorous observation can warm the room. Example: *"You know you're getting older when your knees sound like Rice Krispies: snap, crackle, and pop."*
- **Tie to a Current Event or Cultural Reference** - Connect with what's already on people's minds. Example: *"This week, millions of people tuned in to watch a football game. But there's another game being played in our world today…"*
- **Open with a Quote** - From Scripture, a hymn, a poet, or even a child. Example: *"Theologian Karl Barth once said, 'Preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.'"*

TEN PLUG AND PLAY OPENINGS

The Question Opener - "Have you ever wondered what it would be like if..." (Use to spark imagination: "if Jesus walked into our church this morning…", "If we lived without fear…", etc.)

The Relatable Struggle - "I don't know about you, but sometimes I feel like..." (Invites empathy: "I feel like life is one long to-do list," "I feel like I'm trying to do everything myself.")

The Unexpected Fact - "They say the average person spends..." (Use surprising stats: "…two years of their life waiting at red lights." Then connect to patience, waiting for God, etc.)

The Modern Comparison - "If the Bible were written today, I think this story might sound a little like..." (A parable reimagined: "a corporate scandal," "a broken family holiday," etc.)

The Humor Angle - "Someone once told me that..., and I think they were right." (Example: "Someone once told me that church potlucks are proof of the Holy Spirit's work… because only God could keep that many crockpots plugged in at once.")

The Vivid Scene - "Picture this: ...." (Invite imagination: "You're standing on the edge of the Red Sea, and the water hasn't parted yet.")

The Contradiction - "The world says ..., but God says ...." (Simple, strong contrast: "The world says success defines you, but God says you are beloved before you do anything.")

The Confession - "I have to admit something to you today: ...." (Honest vulnerability: "Sometimes I struggle to trust God," "This story always confuses me," etc.)

The Cultural Tie-In - "This week, the whole world was talking about... But today, God's Word talks about something even bigger." (Sports, news, local event—connect the pew to the pulpit.)

The Direct Challenge - "What if I told you that the story we just read is not just about them back then, but about us, right here, right now?" (Sets the tone: Scripture is alive, relevant, and speaking today.)

COMMON RHETORICAL DEVICES

Rhetorical devices help a preacher capture attention, stir interest, and make the message memorable so that God's Word connects deeply with the congregation.

- **Anaphora** – Repeating the same phrase for emphasis. Example: "We are tired of hate. We are tired of fear. We are tired of division."
- **Antithesis** – Setting two opposites side by side. Example: "We come to church not because we are strong, but because we are weak. Not because we have it all together, but because we don't."
- **Paradox** – A statement that seems contradictory but reveals truth. Example: "To be first, you must be last. To save your life, you must lose it."
- **Inclusive "We"** – Draws the congregation in as participants. Example: "We know what it feels like to be afraid. We know the relief when someone reaches out a hand."
- **Contrast** – Begin with what the world says, then flip to what God says. Example: "The world says your worth is in your success. Jesus says your worth is in your belovedness."

A STRONG CONCLUSION

Just as the opening of a sermon captures attention, the conclusion leaves the lasting impression. A strong conclusion doesn't simply stop—it gathers the sermon's main ideas, ties them back to the Scripture, and points clearly to the good news of God's love. The final words should offer hope, clarity, and a sense of "landing" so the congregation knows where the message has taken them. A good conclusion often restates the central point in fresh language, provides a memorable image or phrase to carry into the week, and ends on a note of encouragement, challenge, or invitation.

Here are two examples:

- **Hopeful Restatement (on Psalm 23)** - "We began by remembering valleys of shadow—the hard places in our lives and in our world. But we end here, with the assurance that God's goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives. Friends, that is the promise: we do not walk alone. God is with us, today and always."
- **Challenge and Invitation (on Micah 6:8)** - "God doesn't ask us to fix the whole world by ourselves. But God does call us to act with justice, to love with kindness, and to walk with humility in our daily lives. So let us go from this place ready to live differently—ready to live as God's people, for the sake of the world Christ loves."

SAMPLE OPENINGS AND CLOSINGS

These ten scripture passages are favorites that a ruling elder can keep close at hand. Each one includes an opening statement to draw listeners in and a closing word to send them out with hope and challenge—so that, even at a moment's notice, the Word can be proclaimed with clarity and confidence.

MICAH 6:8 – JUSTICE, KINDNESS, HUMILITY

OPENING: "Sometimes we make faith far too complicated. We argue over theology, we stress over doing enough, and we wonder if we're getting it right. Micah boils it all down to one simple verse: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God."

CLOSING: "So when we wonder what God wants from us, we don't need to overthink it. Live justly. Love kindness. Walk humbly. It's not complicated, but it will change the world."

PSALM 23 – THE LORD AS SHEPHERD

OPENING: "Even people who've never stepped foot in church know these words: 'The Lord is my shepherd.' Why do they stick with us? Because they promise that in every season—whether green pastures or dark valleys—we are never alone."

CLOSING: "Whatever valley you walk through, whatever fear you carry, remember this: the Shepherd goes before you, beside you, and behind you. You never walk alone."

ISAIAH 40:28–31 – STRENGTH FOR THE WEARY

OPENING: "Have you ever felt like you've just run out of gas—physically, emotionally, spiritually? Isaiah speaks right to that moment. When our strength runs out, God's strength is just beginning."

CLOSING: "Your strength may run out—but God's never does. Trust in the Lord, and you will rise, not because you are strong, but because God is."

MATTHEW 5:14–16 – LIGHT OF THE WORLD

OPENING: "We live in a world that can feel pretty dark at times. Jesus doesn't say, 'Try harder to be light.' He says, 'You already are the light of the world.' The question is: where are we letting that light shine?"

CLOSING: "The world doesn't need us to hide our faith; it needs us to shine it. So, let's light the lamp, put it on the stand, and watch what God will do through us."

MATTHEW 11:28–30 – REST IN CHRIST

OPENING: "Life piles on burdens—work, family, health, expectations. Jesus doesn't add to the load; he invites us to put it down. 'Come to me, and I will give you rest.' That's the kind of rest we all need."

CLOSING: "Whatever burden you carried in today, you don't have to leave with it. Lay it at the feet of Jesus, and receive the rest only he can give."

LUKE 10:25–37 – THE GOOD SAMARITAN

OPENING: "Whenever we hear this story, we quickly say, 'Of course, I'd help.' But if we're honest, sometimes we cross the street, look the other way, or hope someone else will step in. Jesus' story doesn't let us off the hook—it stretches the meaning of neighbor farther than we'd like."

CLOSING: "Neighbors aren't just the people we like or agree with—they're the ones God places in our path. Go and do likewise, and you'll discover the kingdom of God along the way."

JOHN 13:34–35 – LOVE ONE ANOTHER

OPENING: "Jesus could have said the world will know us by our worship style, our doctrine, or even our morality. But instead, he says one thing: 'By this everyone will know you are my disciples—if you love one another.'"

CLOSING: "The best witness we can give this world is not our words, but our love. When we love as Christ loves us, people won't just hear the gospel—they'll see it."

ROMANS 8:31–39 – NOTHING SEPARATES US

OPENING: "Life has a way of trying to convince us that we're alone—when we fail, when we're sick, when we lose someone we love. But Paul shouts back with good news: there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that can separate us from the love of God."

CLOSING: "Nothing you've done, nothing you've suffered, nothing you fear can take you out of God's embrace. You are held, now and forever, in the unstoppable love of Christ."

GALATIANS 5:22–23 – FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

OPENING: "Paul doesn't ask us to show off our faith with big, dramatic gestures. Instead, he talks about fruit—ordinary, everyday evidence of God's Spirit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness. Simple, but powerful."

CLOSING: "The Spirit's fruit is not about trying harder—it's about letting God grow something beautiful in you. So walk in the Spirit, and let your life become the garden God intended."

PHILIPPIANS 4:4–7 – REJOICE, DO NOT BE ANXIOUS

OPENING: "It's one thing to say, 'Don't worry, ' when life is smooth sailing. But Paul writes these words — 'Rejoice always… do not be anxious'—while he's in prison. If he could find joy and peace there, maybe we can too."

CLOSING: "Peace doesn't come from perfect circumstances; it comes from the God who guards our hearts. Rejoice, release your worries, and rest in God's peace."

HEBREWS 12:1–2 – RUN WITH PERSEVERANCE

OPENING: "Life of faith isn't a sprint—it's a marathon. There are moments when we feel like quitting, when the course seems too steep or the road too long. Hebrews reminds us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, cheering us on, and that our eyes belong on Jesus, the one who ran the race before us."

CLOSING: "So when you feel weary, don't give up. Keep running, not on your strength alone, but in the strength of Christ who has gone before you. And remember—you don't run alone. The saints are cheering, Christ is leading, and the finish line is sure."