In recent years scholars from a growing number of disciplines have turned to printed sermons as a source of insight into early modern culture. Sermons obviously tell us about the theological convictions and religious views of the author, but they were also one of the most fundamental tools used by early modern preachers to shape the worldview of their audience. Sermons dealt with much more than religion. Preachers discussed the weather and other natural phenomena, commented on forms of employment and entertainment, and expounded on role expectations within the social hierarchy. Their sermons addressed the major political and social events of the day as well as the milestones of individual lives—birth, marriage, and death. Printed sermons contain not only text but sometimes images and descriptions of musical performances. For those interested in the history of reading and reception theory, sermons illustrate how ideas and attitudes developed and taught at universities, academies, and seminars were understood and repackaged for the consumption of the laity. Sermons tell us not only about elite culture but also about popular culture, and how the two interacted or blended. They are therefore an important source for social and cultural historians, art historians and musicologists, folklorists and literary scholars.¹

The chief difficulty facing those wanting to use printed sermons as a source for their own research is finding those sermons that might be most useful for them. It was with this in mind that a team at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln began developing an on-line bibliographical database of sermons printed in German-speaking Europe. At present we have a prototype database that includes sermons published between 1601–1620, but we hope to obtain funding that would allow us to expand the database to include all sermons, regardless of confession, published between 1517, the beginning of the Reformation, and 1650, the immediate aftermath of the Thirty Years’ War.

The database is intended primarily as a tool and finding aid for researchers, but it has features that enable quantitative analysis of sermon publication and that help us formulate qualitative research questions about preaching and printing in the early modern period. This essay is a first report on what can be learned from our prototype database. It addresses two questions. The first concerns the history of the book more generally: what does our database tell us about books and printing in the early seventeenth century? The second relates more specifically to the genre of book being considered: What does the database tell us about sermons and preaching in that same period? As I will demonstrate, the database to some extent confirms accepted wisdom, but it also contradicts some of the myths and stereotypes that exist about preaching and printing on the eve of the Thirty Years’ War.

Before addressing these questions, I will first describe the database itself. The primary tool for identifying sermons is the on-line Verzeichnis der im deutschen Sprachraum erschienenen Drucke des 17. Jahrhunderts (VD17). Since VD17 is still a work in progress, we have also used the Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog (KVK), a meta-catalogue that includes all of the large and many of the smaller libraries in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and elsewhere. Each entry in our database contains the complete bibliographical information given in these two catalogues, but it goes beyond that to list other information,