

Narrative Preaching

There has been lots of buzz of late concerning the power of narrative preaching to connect with postmodern people who crave, enjoy, and are moved by a good story, or narrative. Of course, narrative preaching is not new. Some homileticians, including Fred Craddock and Eugene Lowry, have been talking about the power of narrative sermons for more than three decades. However, the presumably more practical and relevant 3-5 point linear sermons have monopolized the preaching scene since the rise of Post-Enlightenment Modernity. Point by point linear sermons can be effective but, despite their promise of practical relevance, this sermonic form has become quite predictable. And, as preachers and listeners alike will confess, predictability can crash a sermon before it even takes flight. Perhaps another sermonic form is needed these days to captivate, inspire, and even surprise listeners.

The parables Jesus preached had a knack for inspiring and surprising listeners. Furthermore, the parables did not always tie up loose ends in the name of practical relevance. Jesus' parables were structured by a narrative, not linear, logic. This is not to say that the only sermon that will honor the name of Christ is the narrative sermon; but we can conclude that if Jesus, the master preacher, employed narrative elements in his sermons, there has got to be wisdom in utilizing this form.

What a Narrative Sermon Is Not...

So, what is a narrative sermon anyway? I'm glad you asked. Let me first describe what it is not. A narrative sermon is not merely a few video clips thrown together to support the points the preacher is sharing. It is not necessarily the stringing together of a few personal stories from the preacher's life to convey a handful of propositional points. Making points and then illustrating them with a variety of personal stories, though not homiletically diabolical, does not a narrative sermon make. No matter how many little narratives are placed within this kind of sermon, it still incorporates a linear logic overall.

Even if the genre of the main preaching text is narrative, the sermonic form may still be more linear than narrative. Summarizing the story about a biblical character, say Moses, through linear points (i.e., Moses Prays with Passion, Moses Obeys with Passion, Moses Leads with Passion) forces a narrative text into a linear sermon that may rob both the text and the sermon of their power.

Sermons with a linear logic flow from the *introduction* to *point one* (with proposition, exposition, illustration, and application) to *point two* (with proposition, exposition, illustration, and application) to *point three* (with proposition, exposition, illustration, and application) to the *conclusion*. This form made good sense for a Modern world that, thanks to scientific empiricism, sought to dissect and explain the sum of the whole by reducing it to parts, or points. The desire to know, master, explain, and simplify a biblical text, drove the homiletic machine of yesterday.

What a Narrative Sermon Is...

The structure and goal of a narrative sermon is quite different. The narrative structure is not built with points but with the elements of a good story. Setting, character development, problem, plot, climax, and resolution make for a good story and, I would add, an excellent narrative sermon. The difference between the two sermonic forms is striking:

Linear Logic Sermons

Introduction

Point 1 (explain/illustrate/apply)

Point 2 (explain/illustrate/apply)

Point 3 (explain/illustrate/apply)

Conclusion (or more points)

Narrative Logic Sermons

Setting/Character Development

Problem

Plot

Climax

Resolution

The preaching landscape, especially in the West, has changed. People shaped by postmodernity tend to crave inspiration more than information, and experience over knowledge. This is not to suggest that postmodern people do not want to be well-informed; most do indeed. However, the people in our world and church must first be inspired before they even care to be informed concerning Christ and His kingdom.

Narrative has been the most successful mode of communication for inspiring people across cultures and centuries. Simply put, story speaks to us in a manner that inspires movement toward an encounter with God. The Bible, in its canonical form, really is a unified meta-narrative that tells the redemptive story of God's saving love for the world. Perhaps this is the reason why the Bible is the number one selling, cross-cultural book ever.

While I have incorporated various sermon forms in my preaching over the years, the narrative expository preaching of a single biblical passage has impacted my own faith development significantly, not to mention what it might have done for those who have heard those sermons preached. While linear sermons are a necessary and helpful form for communicating didactic information, narrative sermons seem most-suited for transformational inspiration. The church will always need informative teaching but my preaching "gut" tells me that the narrative form has a better track record for opening up the door of didactic desire.

I triple dog dare you to give the narrative sermon a go! Settle on a text and structure it like the journey through a good story. Instead of going point to point to point, try moving from setting to problem to plot to climax to resolution. Of course, you don't have to use narrative logic every sermon, but most of the people in your congregation will appreciate your attempt at homiletic creativity and variety.

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