

What's your story?

By Tom Westra

Jesus was dying. I could do nothing to save him—not even to ease him. I could only watch and suffer the sorrow too. I was a child. Yet I saw every detail of his passion exactly as the Bible set it down. . . . On Wednesday evenings, late in winter, for a full six weeks preceding Easter . . . when my father took the Bible . . . and began to read the sorrows of Jesus, from the Last Supper to his last cry on the cross—I was there. . . . (The) winds of winter shrieked outside; but I wasn't in the white-brick church. I was nowhere in North Dakota. I had slipped into The Story (Reliving the Passion, Meditations on the Suffering, Death and Resurrection of Jesus as Recorded in Mark, Walter Wangerin Jr., Zondervan, 1992, p. 11-12).

Do you remember sitting in midweek Lenten services as a child and getting swept up in the story? In your mind's eye, you were not in a church, but standing along the wall at Caiaphas' palace, the flame of torches revealing faces red with anger. Brutal men slap Jesus. Spit on him. You are horrified, not at what they do to him—as bad as it is—but because you know he is standing in your place.

Wandering out to the courtyard, you weep with Peter remembering the times you denied him because it was not convenient or comfortable to be counted with him. You follow to the stone pavement. And as Pilate cries out, "Behold the man!" your heart sinks because he does not look like a man anymore. They have scourged him. A crown of thorns presses on his head. He is soaked in his own blood; his face disfigured and bruised by the fists of those cruel men. You follow to Golgotha and look into the face of the man driving the nails, and it is your own face, for it is your sins that have caused this.

Around his cross, there is a sea of faces, loathing him, mocking him. "Come down if you are the Christ." And you want him to. You want him to come down. "Jesus, show them." But he can't. He can't come down and save you, too. Resigning yourself to what is going to happen, you murmur, "Jesus, remember me

when you come into your kingdom." And in this awful place—this place heavy with sin and judgment and death—your heart leaps as he answers back, "You will be with me in paradise."

He screams, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But his Father does not answer. "My God, why?" And you answer quietly, "Jesus, I know why. It is because of me. This is my hell. This is what you suffer for me. This is how much you love me."

"It is finished," he cries. But it is not the cry of a defeated man on a skull shaped hill, it is the cry of the victor who has just thrown open the gates of heaven for his brothers.

In the retelling of The Story, you are swept into it, and in that story you meet Christ. "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20).

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And as you stand beneath that cross, taking it all in, you say, "I love you, too, Jesus. Whatever you ask of me, from this day forward, it is yours." "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

"What's your story?" someone may ask. Which is a way of asking, "Who are you?"

What's my story? It is his story. Jesus' story. His death is my death. And his life is my life. His story is what makes me who I am.

If this issue of *Preach the Word* arrives in your mailboxes about the time I anticipate, Lent will just be starting. May God richly bless your Lenten preaching.



Tell Me a Story

When we proclaim the Gospel we are telling a story—a true story. God acted in time, in real places, touching real people (John 1:14). We do not stand in the pulpit to bring a series of “how-tos”, telling people how to handle their finances or how to have a better marriage, all “based on a tiny exposition of a hidden verse deep in the bowels of Proverbs” (*Preaching, The Art of Narrative Exposition*, Calvin Miller, Baker Books, 2006, p. 30.) No, we proclaim The Story.

“Preaching is rescue work. It arrives on the human scene with splints and bandages to save and heal—and restore a world to all that was lost when the gates of Eden clanged shut” (Calvin Miller, p. 13). And the message that rescues is Jesus’ story (Romans 1:16). And as I proclaim his story I will use other stories—stories from the Bible and stories from everyday life—to help my listeners understand what that Gospel means for their lives and to guide them in their thankful response.

“Preaching is rescue work.”

In the survey I sent out last spring, I asked people who have heard a lot of WELS preaching to tell me how we can make our preaching better. Some of the responses were:

- Do not tell stories. Tell me about Jesus.
- Do not cite literature or poetry. Keep the message on the Bible.
- WELS preachers tell too many anecdotes.

Other responses were:

- Use stories and illustrations.
- Include more narrative.
- Make applications that are real and meaningful.

I expected the latter responses. Everyone likes a good story, right? I did not expect the former responses. Might they suggest that sometimes stories are not used well?

One Sem student said to his homiletics prof, “I did not come here to learn how to tell anecdotes. How can we communicate to people the seriousness of the truth of God if we have to tell them silly little stories?” (*Christ-Centered Preaching*, Bryan Chappell, Baker Academic, 2005, p. 177). Are there times when our “silly stories” have distracted from The Story we have to tell?

PITFALLS OF STORYTELLING

You have spent 2-3 minutes, using reason and logic, explaining a point of the text. Eyes are glazing over. You’re losing them! Then you tell a story and faces brighten. They’re back! Tell a story that touches the emotions and even the most hard-bitten curmudgeon in your congregation will have a tear in his eye. Stories are powerful; but because they are, they can be abused.

Stories can touch emotions in ways that reason cannot. But if we

tell stories in order to be popular as a preacher or for the purpose of manipulating people’s emotions, we are like the preachers Paul describes who “peddle the word of God for profit” instead of speaking “before God with sincerity, like men sent from God” (2 Corinthians 2:17). Story for story’s sake is not faithful preaching. It is entertainment.

Stories can illustrate or explain, but if we overuse stories some in the congregation (our “left-brained” brothers and sisters) will be left confused. Not everyone is a “visual” learner. Some will be left wondering, “What was the point?”

If we rely *only* on story to explain and clarify, and fail to use logic and reason to drive home the point at the end of the story, listeners may draw a conclusion we did not intend. How many times has someone come up to you and said, “Loved the sermon, pastor. Loved the story about _____!” But as you listened more your heart sank. You realized they had missed your point—and the point of the text! Stories are not a replacement for logic and reason in explaining a text.

If there are dangers to avoid in storytelling, we might ask:



WHY TELL STORIES?

I am not going to cite all the statistics that suggest we have moved from an age of print to an age of video. You've heard them. People today "listen" with their eyes.

"Crowds in malls and airports gather around television monitors waiting for the slightest glimpse of news, while newspapers brimming with analyses lie in stacks at neighboring newsstands. . . . Even newspaper publishers know that only 4 or 5% of their audience reads beyond the first paragraph...and that readership triples or quadruples for a story bearing a picture (the caption being the most read paragraph in the entire account) (Chapell, p. 181).

When Jesus was asked, "who is my neighbor?" he did not respond with a Hebrew word study. He said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho...."

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Why tell stories? 1) Pictures are the language of our day.

We also tell stories because "there are pathways of understanding that do not lead through the left brain" (Prof. Mark Paustian, "Using Biblical Narrative to Encourage Colleagues," keynote presentation at the 2008 Leadership Conference).

When a sermon contains too many complex ideas, all conveyed by propositional statements, without the aid of illustrations, most of us struggle to understand. We learn experientially and stories create the experience. When I experience a concept—even vicariously through a story—I comprehend more than when I just hear a concept.

With an illustration a preacher says, "I'll take you there. Live the experience with me so that you will understand fully what this biblical truth means" (Chapell, p. 176).

Jesus didn't just say pray persistently, he told a story of a dishonest judge and a desperate woman (Luke 18). He didn't just say, "Your sins are forgiven." He told a story of a loving father waiting for his prodigal son to return (Luke 15).

Why tell stories? 2) Stories aid understanding by taking an abstract Biblical truth and making it concrete.

Finally, we tell stories because sermons are not just to communicate Scriptural truth. They are to apply that truth to our lives. The listener wants to know the "so what?" of the sermon. He wants to know how God's Word intersects with his life. Stories help. As the listener "sees" the difference that a Biblical truth makes in the life of someone else, he is able to apply it to his own life.

Why tell stories? 3) Stories can apply Biblical truths to our lives.

Can I add just one more? **Stories touch the heart.** We must be careful here. Hearts can be wrong. "If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts... (1 John 3:20). Our faith is not based on emotions. But we do preach to the heart as well as to the head. And stories speak to our hearts in ways that logic and reason cannot.

HOW DO YOU TELL A STORY?

1) Set it up.

Pause briefly in your delivery and use an opening sentence to let your listeners know that you are taking them somewhere.

"There was a man who had two sons..."

"Everyone at the Christmas party in the 5th grade classroom was having a great time, everyone except for Susan."

2) Choose the details of your story carefully.

This is critical. Include enough detail to make the story come to life and to draw the listener into the experience. Sights. Sounds. *Feelings.* Paint a picture. But do not include so many details that the forest is lost for the trees. Choose details that are going to help you make your Scriptural point and leave the rest out. Jesus' stories were simple.

We naturally see our lives in terms of stories. In much of our conversation we narrate the events of our day: this happened, then that happened, and so on. Although we may imagine our life as a story, it should not take a lifetime to tell it! Knowing what to leave out is as important as knowing what to include. "Please, get to the point!" We all know people who cannot tell us about getting a flat tire without first telling us how they bought the car (Robert Atwan, in a blog entitled, "What is Narrative, Anyway?").

"... he squandered his wealth in wild living...longed to fill his stomach with the pods the pigs were eating...his father ran to his son, threw his arms around him...and kissed him...bring the best robe and put it on him...kill the fattened calf..."

Presents were piled high beneath the brightly decorated classroom tree. We excitedly talked about who had our name, what our gift might be. Plans were being hatched for great adventures over the Christmas break. But while we laughed and joked, Susan sat by herself, softly crying. Our teacher said, "She just needs some time."

3) Create suspense/tension/surprise.

"I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you." (Suspense: How will the father react to this son?)

Susan's father had died two weeks before Christmas, and there was nothing in the packages under the tree, nothing in the upcoming vacation, that could take her pain away. (Tension: What did Susan need?)

Effective storytelling is not a matter of simply repeating a sequence of events but of selecting events that lead to something significant. A story has a plot, a deliberate staging of events to achieve an effect: suspense, surprise, intrigue. E. M. Forster made a useful and much-cited distinction. 'The king died and then the queen died' are facts. 'The king died, and then the queen died of a broken heart' is a story (Robert Atwan, adapted).

4) Use active verbs. Tell the story as if it's happening right now. Don't be afraid to be dramatic.

"Don't say the old lady screamed. Bring her on and let her scream" (Mark Twain).

5) Make Christ the hero.

Old Testament narratives are great illustrations. But beware making David the hero of your story. All those OT events illustrate the central truth of the OT, "The Lord, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness..." (Exodus 34:6,7). Make Jesus the hero.

6) Conclude your story by stating your point.

As pointed out earlier, the point of your story must be clear for the story to be effective. After Jesus told the story of the persistent widow, he said, "And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones...?"

WHERE DO I FIND ILLUSTRATIONS?

The best source is your own experience. Read the texts on which you will be preaching in the next month or so. Think about the main points of those texts and how they relate to the lives of your people. And then observe. Jesus' stories had to do with every day things. As you listen to the news, hear songs, watch movies, interact with your family, and observe others in their daily routines, you will find illustrations. Carry a pad of paper or use your smartphone to capture a thought when it occurs to you. (You won't remember it later.) Have a file system for those illustrations you won't immediately use.

Early in my ministry I often quoted from great literature, Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Shakespeare. The congregation was impressed. Oh, not with my sermons. With how much I read. More recently I have quoted from "The Fault in Our Stars" and "The Good Lie"—movies and stories that they know.

If you must refer to the Spanish Armada ... isolate its human features. Let the listeners hear the cannons flash, feel the storm, and fear the shoals... (Chapell, p. 192).

Can I use the illustrations of others? Sure. But tell them honestly. Don't say it happened to you if it didn't.

Should you give credit? Probably not by name. A sermon is not a conference paper. Someone else's illustration might be introduced with something like, "I heard a story about ..." or "I read about someone who..."

One last encouragement. It seems to me that our people do not know the stories of the Bible the way they once did. What a rich source of narrative! You don't need to come up with lots of stories to illustrate and clarify and touch emotions when the text is providing the story. Just be sure to tell the story of the text in a lively way, always bringing your people to the cross. God bless your telling of the The Story.



For further study on the topic of using narrative in your preaching:

Preaching, the Art of Narrative Exposition, by Calvin Miller

The chapter, "The Pattern of Illustration" in *Christ-Centered Preaching*, by Bryan Chapell

Using Illustrations to Preach with Power, by Bryan Chapell

"Using Biblical Narrative to Encourage Colleagues," keynote presentation at the 2008 Leadership Conference, available on Vimeo