

# PREACH

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## When There Is No Gospel

“Every sermon should proclaim specific Gospel.” This is a basic homiletical principle that is not much debated among preachers in WELS. The problem is that not every text contains Gospel, specific or otherwise. If our sermons are to be shaped by the text, what do we do?

There are a number of reasons why a text may contain no Gospel. Its purpose may be the first use of the Law, doing nothing more than convicting of sin and calling for repentance. It may focus on sanctification, encouraging and advising the child of God on the new life in Christ. Or it may be heavy on narrative where both Law and Gospel are only implied. This article looks only at the first of these types of text.

When a preacher decides that he is going to preach on the Old Testament pericope for a certain Sunday, he often confronts a text with no Gospel—its purpose is the first use of the Law. The text comes from one of the prophets, and the sole purpose of the prophet’s words is to describe Israel’s godlessness and to proclaim the Lord’s anger and judgment. He reads the verses through, reads them again, and wonders, “Where in this text am I going to get the Gospel?” He may finally conclude that the wise thing would be to preach on the Gospel or Epistle this Sunday. A more suitable Old Testament text might come along next week.

Although there are many examples of such texts, one of my favorites is Amos 8:4-7, the Old Testament reading for Pentecost 18, Series C. In these few verses the Lord condemns the greed of Israel which moved them to conduct business on the Sabbath



Day and use dishonest weights and other shady practices in their business dealings. The text ends with a verse that is anything but Gospel: “The Lord has sworn by the Pride of Jacob, ‘I will never forget anything they have done.’” What a thought to leave our people with. Maybe a different text would be better on that Sunday.

There are, of course, a couple of time-honored ways of dealing with such a text. A preacher may appeal to the context of the entire Bible, saying that God didn’t always speak this way, and then refer to a Gospel passage. The problem with this approach is that the Gospel seems tacked on, and has nothing to do with the text. Another approach is to look for Gospel in some other verse of the book. In this case the preacher might refer to the closing verses of Amos’ book and say, “Remember the Lord said through this same prophet, ‘In that day I will restore David’s fallen tent.’” In response some hearers might think, “Yes, but that isn’t what the Lord said in this text. What is he doing, contradicting himself, grouchy one day, cheerful the next?” Valid as both of these solutions are, they do contain some problems.

Here is another possibility. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that he came not to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them. Then he vowed, “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth

disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.” The Law stands, but it stands fulfilled in Christ. Its demands have been met; its punishments have been endured. This means that everywhere the Law is proclaimed, even in its most severe form, the Gospel is implied.

Look at the Amos text! Where we fail to honor the hearing of God’s Word, Jesus succeeded. Where we seek our own good at our neighbor’s expense, Christ reached out graciously and selflessly to others. And the closing words, “I will never forget anything they have done”—what a powerful explanation for Good Friday. The Father’s holiness would not let him forget his creatures’ sin. He remembered them vividly when he looked in anger at his Son hanging on the cross. He would not forget them when Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

This is an approach that goes beyond the text, just the way the others do. But it is a natural extension, flowing smoothly from the wording and thoughts of the text. It does not make the Gospel look like a preacher’s intruding addition. With a little bit of work you will find out that this approach works in many Old Testament texts that contain only Law.

*J. Westendorf*

# AN ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVE STYLE PREACHING

Everybody loves a story. This is the basic premise which underlies a preaching style that has become widespread in some Protestant circles. One of the leading proponents of this style, Eugene Lowry (*The Homiletical Plot*, John Knox Press, 1980), rejects the idea that narrative style preaching is gaining popularity mainly because it is entertaining. Rather, he argues that narrative style sermons are a must because mass media has changed the way most people process information today. The average person in contemporary America can't process information unless the spoken word is regularly accompanied by visual images.

Using visual images doesn't necessarily mean showing pictures. God has given every human being an internal visual mechanism called imagination. Spoken words can use imagination to bring vivid images up on the screen of people's minds. Making the sermon a vivid story enables the preacher to take people back across the centuries to the time and place where the text took place. In this way the sermon actually leads people to experience the text by walking in the shoes of those in the text.

An expository sermon presents the biblical truth of the text in a treatise made up of two or three separate parts, or sermonettes, each with its own logical climax and contemporary application. By contrast, in the narrative sermon the hearer sees the law and gospel portrayed in the sequence of events that involve the people in the text. The narrative sermon is a single story with one climax that is always gospel oriented.

## The format of a narrative sermon

In preparing a narrative sermon, the preacher will do an exegesis of the text with special attention to three things: the setting of the text, all the

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people who are part of the text, and the plot (story line) of the text. In developing his sermon, the preacher will develop the basic conflict or problem that arises in the text because of human sinfulness and then highlight the divine resolution of that problem.

In order to maintain the interest of his audience, the preacher will not tell the people what he is going to tell them (introduction and theme), then tell them (the body of the sermon), and finally summarize what he told them (conclusion). Instead, he will introduce the story in the text by posing the problem for the day in a striking way (e.g. people may have material things like Zacchaeus but aren't truly at peace). Secondly, at key intervals he unfolds the thoughts and actions of the people in the story. He will present several ways that people might try to solve that problem on their own apart from God (e.g. Zacchaeus' thoughts and actions, the thoughts and actions of the crowd with Jesus, the thoughts and actions of the people who reacted when Jesus went to Zacchaeus' home). Next, he will reveal the divine answer to the problem and explain fully how that answer solves the problem completely (the words and actions of Zacchaeus and Jesus at Zacchaeus' home). Finally, he will lead his hearers: a) to rejoice in what God has done in resolving this problem also for them; and b) to thank God for this undeserved gift.

Those who promote the narrative sermon say three things are essential. The problem must be a gripping one that demands resolution in the mind of the hearer. As the story of the text unfolds, a number of unsatisfactory solutions must be presented so that the hearer yearns for a real solution. The resolution of the problem must be clear and complete so that the hearer is relieved and celebrates God's goodness.

## Suggested techniques

The preacher as storyteller could approach his task from a number of viewpoints. He could tell the story as a third person observer (i.e. pretending that he is like a reporter who is watching and interpreting the events taking place in the text). Or the story could be told in the first person by having one of the people in the text relate the events as his own story (e.g., the prodigal son).

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*A narrative text contains a story, and people love a story. So the exposition should retain all the life and color of people in that story.*

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To make the story vivid, the preacher should not hesitate to supplement the text in various ways. He could use his imagination to enlarge on details that might at first seem insignificant (why the prodigal's older brother calls a servant out to tell him the meaning of the celebration that is going on in the house). He could make general statements specific by adding probable details (make the statement that the prodigal went into a far away country more vivid by describing a place where he possibly went). He could supply details that are not mentioned in the text but are part of the cultural context (explain that the greater

portion of the inheritance went by custom to the oldest son in the family). He could fill in the story a bit by enlarging on some key events (imagine some thoughts the prodigal might have had when he was living it up and then later when he was in a sorry state after he had exhausted his inheritance). He could do some foreshadowing in the early part of the story by inserting an item that would set the stage for later events (have the father suggest to the prodigal as he leaves that he should keep in touch with his father).

The preacher could also add interest to the story in ways that would not be supplementing the text. He could supply information given elsewhere in Scripture that provides background for the events in the text (the Mary who anoints Jesus for his burial in the week prior to his death is the same one who earlier sat at Jesus' feet listening to his word). He could probe the thoughts, motives, attitudes, or feelings that lie behind the actions taken by people in the text (Mary's attitude in anointing Jesus for his burial, Judas' motive for criticizing this act as a waste of money). He could turn indirect discourse into direct discourse to make the action in the story more interesting.

The goal of all these techniques is one and the same, namely, to make the people in the text come alive so that the sermon hearers can identify with them. Then the hearers can view the text's basic human problem and the divine gospel resolution with the eyes and the mind and the heart of the people in the text.

### **Strengths and weaknesses**

In spite of the praise that some give to the narrative style of preaching, it has two very serious weaknesses. Not all Scripture is narrative. So this style of preaching limits texts that can be used for sermons to those that are narratives (or some epistle or poetry texts that can easily be turned into

narratives). Also, when the preacher supplements the text in various ways in order to make it an interesting story, the sermon becomes a combination of divine revelation and human imagination.

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These two weaknesses are enough to lead us to shrink from using the narrative sermon as standard fare. Still there are some important points we can learn from those who favor this style of preaching. When we do preach on a narrative text from the four Gospels, Acts, or Old Testament history, we should avoid turning it into a treatise that is logical but quite abstract. A narrative text contains a story, and people love a story. So the exposition should retain all the life and color of people in that story.

In the exposition of epistle texts, the preacher can make that text more concrete and thus more interesting by presenting portions of the text in story form. Let the author (Paul, Peter, John, the writer to the Hebrews) speak in the first person to the people he is addressing (Galatians, Ephesians, Hebrews). And let those people respond to the author in the first person as they speak to the author about the spiritual problem(s) they are facing. Use direct quotes rather than presenting the key thoughts of the text as abstract propositions in indirect discourse.

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## "Can You Use This?"



**FIRE**, it's a word that brings terror to the hearts of the people living in the small ranching and farming communities in which I was raised. A spark from the exhaust of a tractor or a flash of lightning can start a grass fire that can literally burn for days in that wide-open country . . .

People in ranch country have been taught from an early age the only way to escape from a range fire is to start a backfire. Burn a place out in the grass where you can safely stand as the range fire passes you by.

On Judgment Day, when this world will be destroyed by fire, God has provided us a place where we can safely stand, a place where he has already poured out His white-hot anger over our sin, and that place is the cross of Jesus Christ our Savior. Our Savior has already paid the punishment we deserve. Jesus Christ is our backfire. We stand in safety as the fire of God's wrath passes us by. When Jesus comes again on the last day, for us who have been given the gift of faith, it won't be as our Judge to destroy us but rather as our Savior, to welcome us into heaven.

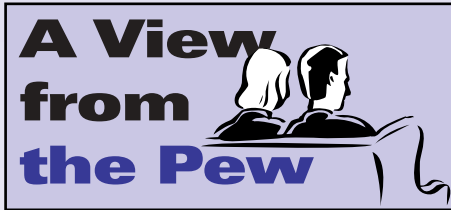
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In preaching on both narrative and non-narrative texts, the preacher should go behind the words of the text. He should look at the thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and emotions of the people in the text, or of the author, and the people to whom the words of the text are addressed. By probing in this way the preacher can lead his hearers to identify with these people. Then they can absorb the biblical truth of the text directly and concretely rather than hearing this truth presented in abstract statements that are somewhat removed from the events of the text.

The narrative style of preaching may occasionally be used to good advantage in sermons that are preached on the high festivals of the church year. The Christmas story, the Good Friday story, the Easter story, and the Pentecost story lend themselves to a narrative style sermon. In each case, the festival service focuses on the gripping problem of sin that God resolves in real events.

Perhaps this is not just a modern insight. Both Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus never spoke to the people without using parables. Jesus' parables used people's imagination to visualize the abstract truths that he was teaching them about God's kingdom. Making every sermon a narrative sermon may not be the approach we choose to use. But, if we want people to remember and understand, we certainly should use vivid illustrations to communicate to them every major point in our sermons.

David P. Kuske



*Dear Pastor,*

I want to take this opportunity to thank you for the way you illustrate your sermons. When you use similes and metaphors, or something more extended like a story, it really makes your sermon and the point you are making come alive. Even a picturesque word or phrase helps raise vivid images in my mind. I guess I'm like many people who like books with pictures in them.

I appreciate the effort you make, because I know it takes an effort, a big one, to effectively illustrate a sermon. Usually when a preacher shakes a sermon out of his sleeve, good illustrations are one of the casualties. I have heard sermons without illustrations that have been doctrinally sound and textual, but they certainly were hard to listen to.

There are times when I have trouble listening to sermons. I come to church without enough sleep or with something else occupying my mind. Obviously, you are not to blame for that. But, a well-illustrated sermon certainly helps me stay with you as you preach.

I have just a couple things about illustrations. Don't make stories too long. Sometimes I can see where a long story is going and I get bored. At other times I become so interested in the story that it overwhelms the sermon, and I forget what you were talking about. I know it is a fine line to walk, but I appreciate your making the effort.

The other thing is make sure the illustration fits. There are illustrations that have left me asking, "What did that have to do with the point?" On the other hand, there is nothing better than an illustration that makes me say, "I never thought of it that way before. That really makes the point."

Keep up the good work. We in the pew like the results.

*Your grateful parishioner*

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*the Word*

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