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ABSTRACT

NARRATIVE PREACHING: A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY THEORY
AND THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION
OF AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL IN THE
WALLA WALLA COLLEGE CHURCH

by

John C. Cress

Adviser: Kenneth B. Stout

ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: NARRATIVE PREACHING: A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY THEORY
AND THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF AN
INTEGRATIVE MODEL IN THE WALLA WALLA COLLEGE CHURCH

Name of researcher: John C. Cress

Name and degree of faculty adviser: Kenneth B. Stout, Ph.D.

Date completed: May 2000

The Topic

The topic of this project is narrative preaching. Post-modern culture is characterized by a surfeit of information and a famine of meaning. A cacophony of voices competes for its attention and in such an environment God's Word frequently goes unheard. Thus it is of critical importance that the gospel be heard in a "language" this culture readily understands. Because it is specifically attuned to the contemporary sensibility of human beings (i.e., it is a "language" most individuals intuitively understand), narrative and narrative forms of preaching have particular power to assist individuals in coming to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

The Purpose

This project seeks to develop a model for narrative preaching, to implement the model through a series of narrative sermons presented in a collegiate church, and to evaluate the impact of the sermons on a representative group of listeners. Another goal of the project is to enhance the researcher's skill in the development and performance of narrative sermons.

The Sources

Sources for this project include a select list of books and periodical articles, primarily published since 1970, on theories of time and narrative structure, foundational, historical, and practical theology, the Bible as literature, hermeneutics, general homiletics, and comparative narrative homiletics. Data pertaining to the evaluation of the narrative sermons and their presentation to the congregation were gathered by way of an evaluation instrument constructed specifically for this project.

Conclusions

The general conclusion is that narrative preaching is an effective means of reaching contemporary listeners, even for some who may not consider themselves narratively inclined. The integrative model presented in this project is based on a synthesis of the elements of several established models and appears to be a useful approach to narrative preaching. Further deployment and testing of the model are merited, based on the initial evaluations.

Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

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WALLA WALLA COLLEGE CHURCH

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by

John C. Cress

May 2000

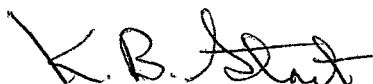
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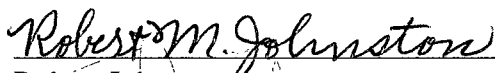
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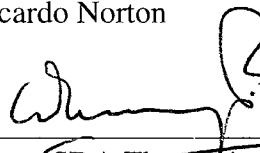
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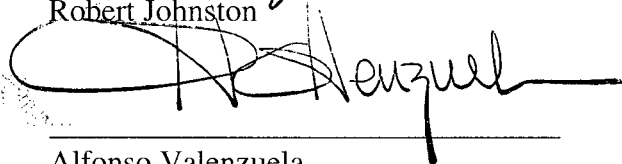
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Alfonso Valenzuela

May 23, 2000

Date approved

Dedicated to Pamela, Jana, and Jaci,
who lovingly and graciously
share their lives and
stories with me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	viii
Chapter		
I.	INTRODUCTION	1
	Justification of the Project	1
	Divine Nature and Purpose	1
	The Divine Call to Preach	3
	Human Nature and Narrative	5
	Addressing Contemporary Culture	7
	A Developing Discipline	9
	A Force in Transformation	10
	A Congregation in Which to Grow	11
	Description of the Project	12
	Limitations of the Project	12
	A Definition of Narrative	14
	To Know and Tell	14
	A Mode of Transport	15
II.	A THEOLOGY OF NARRATIVE PREACHING	17
	The Place of Preaching in the Theological Enterprise	17
	Characteristics of Practical Theology	17
	Local and Performative	18
	Inductive and Interdisciplinary	19
	One Approach to Proclamation	19
	Toward a Definition of Narrative	20
	Distinctions between Narrative, Story, and Stage Performance	21
	A Functional Definition of Narrative and Its Function within This Study	22
	A Definition of Narrative Preaching	22
	The Bible as the Master Story	23
	Basic Theological Assumptions about the Master Story	24
	The Story Is Reliable, Understandable and Purposeful	24
	The Story of Ultimate Reality	26
	Happily Ever After	28
	The Message	29

The Emphasis	30
A Grace Orientation	31
The Source for Preaching	32
A Narrative Hermeneutic	35
A Whole Brain Approach	36
Getting into the Story	39
It Takes a Community	39
The Narrative Preacher and Personal Spirituality	40
The Merging of Stories	45
Hearers of the Word	46
The Narrative Life of a Congregation	47
The Goal of Preaching	51
Preaching for a Response	53
The Power of Preaching	53
Conclusion	55

III. A DESIGN FOR NARRATIVE PREACHING: TOWARD THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL 57

Introduction	57
Background to the Rise of Contemporary	
Models of Narrative Preaching	57
Advantages and Disadvantages of Narrative Preaching	59
The Narrative Advantage	60
Limitations of Narrative Preaching	64
A Survey of Narrative Homiletics at the Dawn of the	
Twenty-First Century	68
Four Contemporary Models	69
Charles Rice	70
A Critique of Rice's Story Sermon Approach	72
Eugene Lowry	73
A Critique of Eugene Lowry's Plot Approach	79
Fred Craddock	80
A Critique of Fred Craddock's Inductive Approach	83
David Buttrick	84
A Critique of David Buttrick's Phenomenological Approach	86
Eslinger's Approach to Synthesis	88
A Critique of Richard Eslinger's	
Narrative-Imagery Approach	90
Development of an Integrative Model for Narrative Preaching	91
An Integrative Model for Narrative Preaching	95
Characteristics of Narrative Preaching	95
A Step-by-Step Approach	97
Getting into the Game	102

IV.	IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT . . .	104
	Inspiration for the Project	104
	Implementation of the Project	107
	A Review of Relevant Literature and Development of the Model	107
	Recruitment of a Team	108
	Calling the Team Together	110
	The Evaluation Instrument	113
	Overall Impressions	113
	Dealing with Scriptural Material	114
	The Use of Narrative Forms	115
	The Use of Time	116
	The Experience of the Sermon	116
	How Can This Preacher and Sermon Be Improved?	116
	A Prayer Team	117
	Development of the Series of Narrative Sermons	117
	Notifying the Resource Group	118
	Presenting the Narrative Sermons	118
	A Description of the Sermons	118
	The Mid-Term Interviews	121
	Recording Sermons and Distributing Forms	122
	Preserving Anonymity	123
	Assimilating the Data	123
	Assessing the Impact of the Series	124
	Looking to the Future	125
V.	SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	126
	Summary	126
	Twelve Principles	126
	Conclusions	128
	The Joy of Discovery	128
	A Continuing Learning Curve	128
	A Revival of Primitive Enthusiasm	129
	A Modest Success	129
	Finding a Home in Narrative	130
	Inhabiting Other Worlds	131
	A Means of Spiritual Formation	133
	Recommendations for Further Study	133
	The Usefulness of the Model for the Task of Hermeneutics	134
	The Situational Viability of Narrative Preaching	134
	A Program of Congregational Education in Narrative	135
	The Narrative Receptivity of Individuals	135
	Narrative Receptivity and Developmental Studies	135
	Narrative and Personal Spiritual Formation	136

Narrative Preaching and the Evangelistic Mission of the Church	137
A Series of Doctrinal Sermons in the Narrative Mode	137
A Study of Time, Sanctuary, and Narrativity	138
Resources for a Narrative Approach to Congregational Formation	138
A System for Collecting, Storing, and Retrieving Narrative Resources	138
Epilogue	139
Appendix	
A. ORIENTATION GUIDE FOR RESOURCE GROUP	142
B. GRACE ORIENTATION MATERIALS	144
C. EVALUATION INSTRUMENT	151
D. NARRATIVE SERMON MANUSCRIPTS AND EVALUATIONS .	153
Narrative Sermon 1: “Old Men Never Run”	153
Evaluation of Narrative Sermon 1	157
Narrative Sermon 2: “Crossroads of Compassion”	160
Evaluation of Narrative Sermon 2	167
Narrative Sermon 3: “A Touching Story”	170
Evaluation of Narrative Sermon 3	177
Narrative Sermon 4: “What a Splendid Disappointment”	181
Evaluation of Narrative Sermon 4	186
Narrative Sermon 5: “At the End of the Road to Nowhere”	188
Evaluation of Narrative Sermon 5	193
Narrative Sermon 6: “Only the Heart Can Truly See”	196
Evaluation of Narrative Sermon 6	204
BIBLIOGRAPHY	207
VITA	218

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I wish to thank my colleagues on the pastoral staff and our fellow ministers in the front office of The College Church, each of whom has taken an interest in my doctoral studies and encouraged me. Without the patience and support of my own staff in the Office of the Chaplain at Walla Walla College I would not have been able to pursue and complete this project and dissertation. Thank you for all you do so well!

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The project described in the following pages is developmental in nature. Its goal is to further the pastoral formation of one minister in the discipline of narrative preaching. This dissertation chronicles the process by which an integrative model for narrative preaching was developed and deployed in a series of narrative sermons that were presented and evaluated in the context of ministry in a multi-generational, collegiate church. Subsequent chapters address the topic of narrative preaching from a theological perspective, survey several contemporary models of narrative preaching, and describe the integrative model for narrative preaching. Recognizing that narrative preaching is always a work in progress, this study concludes with a summary of the formative ideas developed on this topic, to date, and recommendations for further study in this important area of homiletic endeavor.

Justification of the Project

Divine Nature and Purpose

The project is justified first because it is grounded in the ultimate reality of a gracious God who has revealed Himself in sacred Scripture through the primary medium of story and who is fully engaged in the temporal realm, seeking healing, integrative relationships with the human family with a view to their ultimate restoration

to glory. J. I. Packer explains the dual realities of a God who is, at once, both above and beyond the human time-space continuum and who is, by His own initiative, actively involved in the temporal dimension of this world:

God is both transcendent over and immanent in his world. On the one hand he is distinct from the world, does not need it, and exceeds the grasp of any created intelligence found in it, yet on the other hand he permeates it in sustaining and new-creating power, shaping and steering it in a way that keeps it on its planned course in a steady and stable state.¹

God's purpose in interjecting Himself into the temporal dimension is clear. It is nothing less than the redemption of estranged men and women through the atoning death of Christ. This is at the core of everything God is doing in the world, as Packer points out: "The central message of Scripture, the hub of the wheel whose spokes are the various truths about God that the Bible teaches, is and always will be God's free gift of salvation, freely offered to us in and by Jesus Christ."²

Preaching is grounded in the reality of the holy, omnipotent God of Scripture. Simultaneously, it is rooted in the temporal world of concrete realities which engulf the hearts and minds of the men, women, and children who live in the temporal dimension within which they come to faith and salvation.

Today, as it has always been, preaching is the task of participating with God in His purpose of communicating something of ultimacy (one Reality) within the confines of time and space (the other reality), so as to bring members of the human

¹J. I. Packer, "God the Image Maker," in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World*, ed. Mark A. Noll and David F. Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 34.

²*Ibid.*, 35.

family to reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ. Sally McFague observes the role of narrative in bringing together these two realities:

For the Christian, the story of Jesus is *the* story par excellence. For his story not only is the human struggle of moving toward belief but in some way that story *is* the unification of the mundane and the transcendent. That God should be with us in the story of a human life could be seen as a happy accident, but it makes more sense to see it as God's way of always being with human beings *as they are*, as in the concrete, temporal beings who had a beginning and an end—who are, in other words, themselves in stories.¹

Narrative forms of preaching work well in fulfilling the commission to proclaim God's story because they are integrally related to the twin realities of God's transcendence and His immanence in this world. We learn of both realities through the medium of narrative and narrative parallels the reality of God's immanence in this world in dramatic ways.

The Divine Call to Preach

Preaching is and always has been a prophetic calling. On the day when the first recorded apostolic sermon was uttered, Peter recalled that God had foretold of this work through the prophet, Joel:

In the last days, God says,
 I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
 Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
 your young men will see visions,
 your old men will dream dreams.
 Even on my servants, both men and women,
 I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
 and they will prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18)

¹Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 138-139.

Lewis points out that Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2:14-39 was a narrative recounting of God's saving activity in the flow of history.¹ Thus from the beginning of the Christian era, "apostles" of Christ have responded to Christ's commission and the Spirit's motivation to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded" (Matt 28:19-20), and they have done so in narrative ways. The prophetic calling to preach is a justification for a project focused on homiletic praxis. That narrative forms were employed in the earliest of Christian preaching is justification for pursuing a developmental project in narrative preaching.

In God's providence, He has appointed ordinary men and women to be partakers of His power (2 Pet 1:3), nature (vs. 4) and purpose (John 3:16-17) to save lost humanity:

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Rom 10:13-15)

Human spokespersons for God, often employing narrative forms of communication, have responded to the prophetic call down through the ages to be bearers of the story of Salvation by Grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Learning to

¹"Jewish history becomes narrative in this first sermon of the Church." Ralph L. Lewis with Gregg Lewis, *Learning to Preach Like Jesus* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989), 109.

follow in their footsteps is a proper justification of this project.

Human Nature and Narrative

If the first justification for this project has to do with the nature of God, it is fitting that another justification has to do with the nature of human beings and human communication.

David Carr observes that human nature is intrinsically tied to both time and narrativity: “To be a human individual is to instantiate a special sort of relationship to time. . . . We have seen how this temporal grasp, in varying degrees of complexity and explicitness, makes us both participants in and surveyors of the temporal flow, both characters in and tellers of the stories constituted by it.”¹

It is a thesis of this project that one of the best ways to preach good news to temporal beings in a temporal world is to use a mode of communication that is inherently temporal and intuitively tuned to the core of human experience; one in which humans are innately interested and to which they are naturally drawn, namely narrative. Humans are integrally connected with and shaped by story. Again Carr argues “that action, life and historical existence are themselves structured narratively, independently of their presentation in literary form, and that this structure is practical before it is aesthetic or cognitive.”² Thus, how humans see themselves, think about themselves and others, and conceptualize the world around them, and even how they contemplate the

¹David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), 94.

²*Ibid.*, 95.

possibility of worlds beyond are rooted and grounded in narrativity. Hayden White is correct in his observation regarding the universality of narrative:

Far from being one code among many that a culture may utilize for endowing experience with meaning, narrative is a metacode, a human universal, on the basis of which trans-cultural messages about the shared reality can be transmitted. . . . The absence of narrative capacity or a refusal of narrative indicates an absence or refusal of meaning itself.¹

Walter Fisher concurs when he observes that humans, by nature, are "storytellers":

Rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings their inherent awareness of *narrative probability*, what constitutes a coherent story, and their constant habit of testing *narrative fidelity*, whether or not the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives.²

When it comes to the task of communicating the greatest Story of all, concerning the best news of all, it is apparent that narrative is a natural, indeed a preferred, medium for facilitating an understanding and integration of God's Word. In the words of Sallie McFague,

We love stories, then, because our lives are stories and we recognize in the attempts of others to move, temporally and painfully, our own story. We recognize in the stories of others' experiences of coming to belief our own agonizing journey and we rejoice in the companionship of those on the way.³

¹Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980): 6.

²Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value and Action* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 5.

³McFague, 138.

Narrative is inherently relational in that it is closely attuned to human cognitive and affective learning and communicating processes. Michael Novak observes that “the human being alone among the creatures on the earth is a storytelling animal: sees the present rising out of a past, heading into a future; perceives reality in narrative form.”¹ Fisher agrees that “the world as we know it is a set of stories that must be chosen among in order for us to live in a process of continual recreation.”²

Narrative is a mode of communication most likely to connect with contemporary listeners, including individuals in an academic community, such as those who make up the primary target audience of this project. The proclivity of the narrative form to engage hearers in ways that are innately resonant with their core experience of reality compels its employment in the task of homiletics.

Addressing Contemporary Culture

Whereas humans have always been narratively oriented, this has never been more true than in today’s world. Thus this project is justified as an important step in learning to understand and address contemporary culture with the gospel.

Christ’s command to go and tell the Story of a crucified, risen Savior (Matt. 28:19-20) was a commission for Christians to leave their own “worlds,” i.e., their own comfort zones, and fully enter into, by way of engagement and dialogue, the world and worldviews of those who must hear the story. Bill Hybels underscores the necessity

¹Michael Novak, “‘Story’ and Experience,” in *Religion as Story*, ed. James B. Wiggins (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1975), 175.

²Fisher, 5.

of understanding and addressing individuals in the temporal dimension when he observes that “you can be utterly biblical in every way, but to reach non-Christians, every topic has to start *where they are* and bring them to a fuller Christian understanding.”¹

Understanding and employing narrative forms can be most helpful in this process.

Post-modern culture is characterized by a surfeit of information and a famine of meaning.² It is obsessed with temporality yet longs for transcendence. A cacophony of voices competes for its attention and in such an environment God’s word frequently goes unheard. David Larsen observes that “no previous generation has ever been so overstimulated by an unrelenting barrage of images, sights, and sounds.”³ Amid and above the desensitizing din of the media deluge, it is of critical importance that good news be heard in a “language” this culture understands; otherwise people perish without the knowledge and hope of a Savior. Narrative is a significant and integral part of that “language.”

Because it is specifically attuned to the “contemporary sensibility”⁴ of

¹Bill Hybels, “Speaking to the Secularized Mind,” in *Mastering Contemporary Preaching*, Mastering Ministry (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1989), 33.

²Ronald Allen offers a succinct assessment of the post-modern worldview from a Christian perspective in “New Directions in Homiletics,” *Journal for Preachers* 16, no. 2 (Lent 1993): 20.

³David L. Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching: Identifying the Issues in Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 39.

⁴The term is that of Gabriel Fackre, who points out that the form of scriptural testimony “is that of narrative.” As such, he argues for its valency in penetrating the communication barriers humans often erect to the gospel. See Gabriel Fackre, “God the Discloser,” in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World*, ed. Mark A. Noll and David F. Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing

human beings, narrative and narrative forms of preaching have particular power to assist contemporary humans in coming to saving faith. Calvin Miller's observation is that we are "a story oriented culture."¹

Literally thousands of new novels, movies, plays, and teleplays are released every year. All of these proclaim our age as the age of the story! In such a story-soaked age, the narrative sermon will naturally find a cultural acceptance which the precept-oriented sermon or the exegesis sermon might never find. Typical congregations nourished on years of television dramas and popular video releases have been groomed to relate to the narrative sermon.²

Narrative forms speak in a natural "voice" to our particular times. If saving faith comes by hearing the gospel preached (Rom 10:13-14), how important it is for preachers to speak in a language men and women immediately understand.

A Developing Discipline

Narrative preaching, as a distinct movement within the larger field of homiletics, is a "young" discipline. A number of its philosophical bases have been posited and debated in previous decades, and several working models and approaches have gained a hearing and a certain degree of popularity.

Specifically, there is a need for more practical approaches and working models that average Christian pastors may utilize in their parish ministries. This project attempts to address this need for ongoing development within the discipline by

Company, 1988), 96.

¹Calvin Miller, "Narrative Preaching," in *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, ed. Michael Dudit (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 104.

²Ibid.

presenting some initial concepts toward an integrated model for narrative preaching. These concepts have served as guidelines for the approach to narrative preaching undertaken herein. The possibility that the integrative model developed in this project will provide the basis for further study and development of narrative preaching as a working and workable alternative to more traditional homiletic strategies provides another justification for engaging in this project at this time.

A Force in Transformation

The inherent potency of narrative forms invites further investigation and provides yet another justification for this project. Story and narrative styles are clearly compelling in their ability to persuade people from many backgrounds¹ to allow God to change the direction of their lives. “‘Story’ articulates a change in experience,” according to Novak. “It is a particularly apt method for expressing the sort of experience that alters one’s fundamental ‘standpoint’ or ‘horizon’.”²

As Christian communicators become more conversant in narrative styles and approaches, it may well be that the entire enterprise will reap a rich harvest of souls for Christ’s kingdom through the application of the discipline in evangelistic and cross-cultural directions. As a part of the pastoral formation of one preacher in one particular cultural milieu, this project finds part of its justification in the goal of enhancing skills in

¹Narrative “is . . . like life itself . . . inter-national, transhistorical, transcultural.” Roland Barthes, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 79.

²Novak, 175.

communicating the Story of God's power to transform lives (2 Cor 3:15-18) in a mode that has, in and of itself, certain transforming qualities.

A Congregation in Which to Grow

The Walla Walla College Church is an intergenerational congregation, situated in the center of a thriving community of faith and higher learning, and, as indicated above, is the arena in which this project was implemented. In recent surveys of the membership of the Walla Walla College Church regarding member needs and expectations for leadership, substantive biblical preaching in a compelling homiletic style consistently ranked at the top of the list of priorities for the church family.¹ As a pastor on The College Church staff, who shares preaching duties with others on the staff,² I perceive this project as one means of addressing the felt need of this congregation for clear biblical communication in a style suited to contemporary listeners.

In addition to being open to innovation in biblical preaching and eager to hear God's Word proclaimed, The College Church also provides an environment where it is safe to learn and grow. Its willingness to accept both the form and this pastor in a structured process of formation provides a final justification for engaging in this project.

Description of the Project

¹The survey (1987), conducted by the senior pastor, polled a cross section of church members and leaders regarding church and pastoral priorities.

²The senior pastor has the primary preaching role in the Walla Walla College Church. Along with other members of the pastoral staff, my opportunities to preach are periodic and occur in a variety of settings: weekly worship services, collegiate vespers services, and campus community chapel services.

This dissertation documents a portion of my personal journey, both academic and professional, toward an increased understanding and the enhancement of skills in narrative preaching within the context of the congregation described above. Specifically, it relates to the development of a theology of narrative preaching and a carefully crafted integrative narrative preaching model through a structured process of reading representatively in the literature of narrative studies, theology, and narrative homiletics approaching the discipline from an integrative perspective assembling a team of evaluators, preparing and delivering sermons in a narrative mode, and evaluating their impact on a group of listeners selected from a cross section of the church's membership, including students.

Employing an integrative approach developed and described in chapter 3, six sermons in the narrative mode were crafted, presented, and evaluated in the setting of the collegiate church. The data from these evaluations are referred to in chapter 4, with the actual evaluation instrument and the individual sermon evaluation tabulations included in the appendices of this study. The final chapter presents a summary of concepts developed in the course of this project, conclusions from the vantage point of a project completed, and several recommendations for continuing study and professional growth in the field of narrative preaching.

Limitations of the Project

Certain limitations are built into this subject. Because the bulk of the literature in this field has been published within the last three decades, the lion's share of

the resources surveyed for this project and dissertation have been selected, for the most part, from within that time frame.

This study claims to be representative of the literature, debate, and trends in the field rather than an exhaustive study of the subject.

Because this study was prepared by one who previously possessed only a cursory knowledge of the formal work in this field and by one who sought, by means of the project, to grow in a particular professional discipline, the concepts presented herein may be considered formative to one pastor's development in the discipline, but by no means normative for an enterprise that continues to grow in and through the second generation of its theory and praxis. It is the intention of this study to present one individual's working model for narrative preaching which may be more extensively deployed and field tested in the future. Only its initial development, implementation, and evaluation are described herein.

Because there are a small number of narrative sermons in this project and because the method of evaluation was qualitative and intentionally simple, no attempt is made to extrapolate from the evaluative data a statistical conclusion about the overall level of viability of the method or approach or the overall level of receptivity on the part of the audience for this mode of preaching versus another mode of homiletic communication. The evaluation responses are quantified only as a means of concise presentation, not in any way to imply trends or correlations within the data.

The definitions of story, narrative, and narrative preaching employed in this study, alluded to briefly below, and elaborated upon in subsequent chapters, are necessarily broad and inclusive. Some of the homiletic strategies discussed may only be

considered "narrative" in the sense of this "big tent" approach to defining the terms.

A Definition of Narrative

William Labov provides a helpful definition of narrative as "one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred."¹ A "minimal narrative," according to Labov, is a "sequence of two clauses which are temporally ordered."²

To Know and Tell

The etymology of the term is instructive in understanding its definition. "The words 'narrative,' 'narration,' 'to narrate,' and so on derive via the Latin *gnarus* ('knowing,' 'acquainted with,' 'expert,' 'skillful') and *narro* ('relate,' 'tell') from the Sanskrit root *gna* ('know'). The same root yields *γνωριμο* ('knowable,' 'known')."³ It is obvious that from the perspective of its origin, the term carries with it ideas of both knowing a certain thing and communicating what is known. These are the same qualities alluded to in John's stated intention in his first epistle:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. . . . We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard. (1 John 1:1, 3a)

¹William Labov, *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 359-60.

²*Ibid.*, 360.

³W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *On Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 1.

The apostle claims to know certain things about Christ and to be telling those things from his perspective. By way of definition, 1 John begins on a narrative note.

A Mode of Transport

Richard Gerrig points to two metaphors that often characterize the experience of narrative: “Readers are often described as *being transported* by a narrative by virtue of *performing* that narrative.”¹ This transportive quality of the experience of narrative is captured poignantly in the following lines by the poet Emily Dickinson:

There is no Frigate like a Book
 To take us Lands away
 Nor any Coursers like a Page
 Of prancing Poetry—
 This traverse may the poorest take
 Without oppress of Toll—
 How frugal is the Chariot
 That bears the Human Soul!²

Through narrative, people of a temporal realm are transported to a dimension that is trans-time, from the world of the “real” to the world of the “really real.” This transportative definition of narrative also helps to define the task of narrative preaching as transporting hearers through Revelation’s “open door” (Rev 4:1) to an encounter with the Divine, to the very presence of Ultimate Reality.

Kenneth Burke adds two more facets to the expanding definition of

¹Richard J. Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 2.

²Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955), 880.

narrative when he observes the interaction between narrative and symbol and the social role of narrative in the formation of communities: “Symbols are created and communicated ultimately in stories meant to give order to human experience and to induce others to dwell in them in order to establish ways of living in common, in intellectual and spiritual communities in which there is confirmation for the story that constitutes one’s life.”¹

In the chapters that follow, an inclusive, multidimensional definition of narrative, accounting for the nuances outlined above, will be used to guide the process of forming a theology and methodology for narrative preaching and a developmental project by which to practice the craft and evaluate the results of that practice. Although useful distinctions can be made between narrative and story, this dissertation generally treats them as functional equivalents. Bert McLellan notes that “most narrative theologians and those wiring in this field . . . use the terms interchangeably.”²

Except for cases where specific emphasis is denoted by capital letters, as in Story or The Story, lower case letters will be used to refer to both the biblical story and stories on a purely horizontal, temporal plane.

¹Kenneth Burke, “Definition of Man,” in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 16.

²Bert Denton McLellan, Jr., “Shared Story: A Narrative Approach to Preaching” (D.Min. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1978), 35.

CHAPTER II

A THEOLOGY OF NARRATIVE PREACHING

The Place of Preaching in the Theological Enterprise

Preaching, at its core, is a theological work. It is one of several key functions of that branch of the discipline generally known as practical theology.¹ Practical theology takes the fruit of exegesis and systematic theology and deploys it through intentional acts of ministry, in order to build up the church of Jesus Christ. Preaching also contributes to the ongoing task of theological development by nurturing a community beyond academic circles in which the formal concepts of exegetes and systematicians may be applied, evaluated, integrated, and ultimately embraced or modified.

Characteristics of Practical Theology

Bartow's four characteristics of practical theology, "local and

¹According to Karl Barth, theology consists of three branches: exegesis, dogmatics or systematic theology, and practical theology (i.e., the application of the work of exegesis and dogmatics to pastoral and evangelistic praxis). See Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 17.

performative, inductive and interdisciplinary,”¹ are useful in understanding the task of proclamation and underscoring the essential nature of the entire enterprise of practical theology.

Local and Performative

By local, Bartow refers to the particular sociological and ideological context within which specific acts of ministry take place. Practical theologians engage in specific forms of ministerial praxis as they conduct worship, nurture congregational life, develop mission, proclaim the word, and embody the gospel in the context of the community of faith and its surrounding cultures and communities. Such praxis, or localized activity, is not just an important part of the theological enterprise, it is central to it.²

Performative acts indicate intentionality in ministry, as distinguished from behaviors that are merely casual. They include a variety of disciplines, both public and private. Preaching is a central act of ministerial praxis, perhaps the most public of all its performative acts, thus demanding significant attention and commitment on the part of the practitioner. Church members care deeply about the careful reflections of one they have chosen to serve the congregation and who, by the act of proclamation, represents something above and beyond both the community and the individual preacher.³

¹Charles L. Bartow, *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 1.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 2.

Inductive and Interdisciplinary

As an inductive work, practical theology attempts to analyze the importance and impact of its own performative acts, as they occur in real time and within the context of a real community. With these data in hand, it seeks to refine and enhance its effectiveness in ministerial praxis. Mid-stream, in the flow of congregational life, practical theology formulates theories and systems by which the work of ministry can be conducted at ever higher levels of excellence, while the final destination or outcome is not apparent.

One can conclude from Bartow's observations, then, that the interdisciplinary nature of practical theology brings to bear the best of exegesis, dogmatics, art, history, science, rhetoric, and a broad range of professional skills in its performative acts of ministry.¹ As Mark Johnson has noted, the content of one's message cannot be separated from the form in which it is constructed and presented, so the careful minister seeks to develop a comprehensive and timely approach to communicating the timeless truths of the Word of God.²

One Approach to Proclamation

Just as there are many disciplines that must be integrated in the task of preaching, so there are many different ways to preach. Narrative preaching is one option

¹Ibid., 3.

²Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 18ff., quoted in *ibid.*

among many methods for accomplishing the task. For reasons suggested in the introduction to this study and which will be further explicated below, narrative is an effective and preferred preaching modality and is thus the focus of this project and dissertation.

Toward a Definition of Narrative

Often narrative is considered a synonym of story. McLellan observes that “most narrative theologians and those writing in this field . . . use the terms interchangeably.”¹ There is, however, according to Ellingsen, no uniformity in the use of terms within the field.

Most theologians and homileticians who employ literary approaches embrace the label of *story theology* or “story” preaching. Others, including myself, prefer the designations *biblical narrative* and “narrative theology.” Still others, notably Brevard Childs and to some extent Hans Frei, while employing literary approaches to hermeneutics, prefer to disown all labels.²

Eugene Lowry recognizes that both terms, narrative and story, can be used interchangeably and can, at the same time, have dual meanings. Both terms may refer to the narrative or story *form* of a sermon and both may also refer to the narrative or story *content* of specific narratives or stories. Lowry’s approach to preaching, which is surveyed in the following chapter, may be termed *narrative* because it follows a narrative *form* but may not always have a narrative *content*, in the narrow sense of the term. Thus,

¹McLellan, 35.

²Mark Ellingsen, *The Integrity of Biblical Narrative: Story in Theology and Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 14.

in his book, *How to Preach a Parable*, Lowry seeks to clarify his use of terms from the outset by stating: “I will use the term *narrative* when speaking of narrative form and *story* when referring to a particular narrative.”¹

Distinctions between Narrative, Story, and Stage Performance

Kellogg and Scholes define narrative as “all those literary works which are distinguished by two characteristics: ‘the presence of a story and a story-teller.’”² Narrative thus goes beyond story. Brown assists in the process of differentiation when he suggests that “a narrative is the telling of a story. . . . A narrative is filled with all the elements of a good story: imagery, color, an appeal to the senses, and a direct involvement of the narrator in the events of the story.”³

As Aristotle conceptualized it, the objective of a story is to “tell” *about* life, while the goal of a stage presentation or narrative is to “show” or *imitate* life. The philosopher understood both story and stage as important but discreet communicative modalities.⁴ Leitch observes that these important distinctions have become conventional wisdom.

¹Eugene L. Lowry, *How to Preach a Parable: Designs for Narrative Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 24-5.

²Robert Kellogg and Robert Scholes, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 4.

³David M. Brown, *Dramatic Narrative in Preaching*, Effective Preaching Series (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1981), 8.

⁴*The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 6.1449b.

Critics since Aristotle, adopting his distinctions between the “representational modes of *mimesis* (showing) and *digesis* (telling), have customarily defined narrative as the essentially *digetic* representational mode. This distinction provides all the precision most audiences require.”¹

To summarize in general terms: Stories *tell* about life, dramatic productions *show* something of life, and narratives *involve* the narrator in the process of *telling the story* about and in the midst of the life surrounding it.

A Functional Definition of Narrative and Its Function within This Study

It is sufficiently precise for the purposes of this dissertation to say that story refers to an organization of ideas intended to tell something about life and that narrative refers to the process of telling the story. The terms are related closely enough to use them as functionally interchangeable descriptors and will be used as such in this paper, in harmony with the prevailing practice in this field.²

A Definition of Narrative Preaching

In its simplest terms, narrative preaching is a method of proclamation that has, at its core, a story or essential ingredients of a story. To be complete, however, one must say that narrative preaching involves the telling of God’s story through the use of narrative form and intent. It is the act of taking the story and making it live in the

¹Thomas M. Leitch, *What Stories Are* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1986), 3.

²McLellan, 35.

process of telling it to the congregation, as David Brown notes:

In the case of a preaching narrative the story is a Biblical one, or a biblically based one, told to enhance the biblical message, to bring it alive, to involve its listeners personally in the sharing of the Good News stories. . . . It is through the *method* of the narrative that the preaching is done. . . . The point at which such a story becomes a preaching narrative is the point at which it is told with some biblical purpose in mind . . . to call people through the characterization to act in response to God's word. The preaching element is necessary in order for a story to become a narrative.¹

Lowry's definition of narrative is helpful at this point in further broadening the definition of narrative preaching to include preaching that follows a narrative *form*, whether or not it has a specifically identifiable narrative (or story) *content*. The narrative *form*, according to Lowry, is characterized as an "event-in-time which . . . moves from opening disequilibrium through escalation of conflict to surprising reversal to closing denouement."²

Narrative preaching can take on many forms and be done with a variety of approaches, as shall be examined more fully in the following chapter. To say that narrative preaching is a creative telling of a portion of God's story in Scripture, in which the preacher and the congregation interact with the story, provides sufficient direction to move now to an understanding of the theological dimensions of narrative preaching.

The Bible as the Master Story

To fully appreciate and comprehend biblical narrative preaching, one must first understand that the Bible begins with a story and continues as one carefully crafted

¹David M. Brown, 8-9.

²Lowry, *Parable*, 25.

and unfolding story. In the first three chapters of Genesis the reader is introduced to the main characters, the central plot, the setting in time (i.e., “in the beginning”), the main arena in which the action occurs (i.e., Earth), and the major outline of a story that will wind its way to completion throughout the rest of the book. Narrative preaching, then, follows the literary genre of the Bible and employs it as a foundational communicative pattern in speaking to the contemporary world.

Basic Theological Assumptions about the Master Story

As a cognitive and reflective enterprise, theology in the Judeo-Christian tradition begins with certain basic assumptions about this story, its Author and major Protagonist, and the corpus of literature in which the story is contained. Understanding these assumptions is fundamental to understanding and appreciating the theological moorings of biblical narrative preaching, which this study is about. Listed below are some of the most important of these theological assumptions about the Bible as Master Story for preaching.

The Story Is Reliable, Understandable, and Purposeful

In contrast to those who assume only mythological significance to the biblical story, it is the assertion of this study that the Bible is an authoritative and trustworthy source for understanding human origin, existence, nature and destiny, and the nature of God and His plan for each individual in the human family. J. I. Packer points out that “we are able to know God because as thinking, feeling, relating, loving

beings we are to that extent like him.”¹ Peter speaks of both the divine origin of the biblical story as well as the divine-human interaction involved in its transmission when he asserts that “no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pet 1:21 RSV).² Bernard Scott observes that “theological categories are incarnated through narrative imaging.”³ In addition to useful insights into matters of anthropology, ethics, liturgy, language, and the life and culture of the ancient Near East, the Bible is a true and reliable self-disclosure on the part of God in the classical sense of revelation.

In harmony with a generally conservative approach to the Bible, this dissertation is based on the assumption that scripture is *the* normative revelation of God and presents its ideas to us in objective terms that are open to human apprehension as part of the rational, formal processes of human cognition. In other words, God’s Word in Scripture is presented to humans in terms they can understand. Gabriel Fackre asserts that God’s revelation entails “trustworthy language with its ontological referents.”⁴ Even

¹Packer, 49.

²Unless specified otherwise, as in this notation, all biblical references are from the New International Version.

³Bernard Brandon Scott, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Solo Savior,” in *Intersections: Post Critical Studies in Preaching*, ed. Richard L. Eslinger (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 156.

⁴Fackre, “Discloser,” 101.

though what one can objectively know about God and human existence from the Bible is by no means exhaustive, it is indeed comprehensive and may be considered true and reliable despite its finitude.

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to take up a lengthy discussion of the process of divine inspiration and its resulting product in scriptural revelation. Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that the purpose of biblical revelation is, in the words of the apostle, the making of human beings “wise for salvation in Jesus Christ” (2 Tim 3:15). The Bible addresses its own origin and objective by asserting that “all scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17).

The Story of Ultimate Reality

The scriptural story assumes a reality beyond itself and beyond the space-time continuum of human existence. It anticipates that the careful reader of the story will join in this same assumption, *a priori*: “For without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Heb 11:1-3, 6). The Bible tells the story of a God who is infinite in His perfection (Job 11:7-10; Ps 145:3; Matt 5:48), His eternity (Ps 90:2) and His immensity and omnipresence (1 Kgs 8:27; Ps 139:7-12).¹ Even though He is infinite, the God revealed in Scripture chooses to interact and communicate with human beings as

¹Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1941), 60-61.

an intimate friend in the confines of the world of their realities.

Very early in the story, one finds God actively initiating the creation of the Earth and the human family (Gen 1:27) and indicating that He is pleased with His work (Gen 1:31), even though its finitude represents a set of dimensions qualitatively different from the ultimacy which He alone enjoys (Job 37:23a; Ps 8:4-5). From the very beginning of the created order, God establishes a temporal rhythm to life on this earth and seeks conversation and communion with members of the human family (Gen 2:2-3; 3:8-9).

In a very direct sense, then, the Bible is God's story of His interactions with those on this planet who are formed in His image (Gen 1:27-30). The Bible begins with God's act of creation and tells the story of the fall of the first human family and its consequences for all subsequent generations (Gen 3:1-24). It also conveys the promise of God's ultimate deliverance from those consequences through a chosen Redeemer (Gen 3:14-15) and the establishment of a covenant people whose story will become intertwined with God's story throughout the flow of salvation history (Gen 15:1-21).

Central to this biblical story is the emergence of the promised Agent of deliverance, Jesus Christ, and the establishment of a new people of promise (Eph 1:3-10; Heb 10:11-25). Prefigured by all previous and lesser agents of God's deliverance (e.g., Moses, Joshua, Elijah, David, and John the Baptist) and by all other covenant people, Christ and His church come to inherit both the glorious privileges that come with their respective callings as well as the awesome responsibilities incumbent upon the chosen ones. Fackre acknowledges the position of Christ at the center of God's revelation:

And so, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and

truth; we have beheld his glory, glory of the only son of the Father!” (John 1:14). With this text we come to the center of the Christian story, the decisive deed and disclosure on which the narrative turns.¹

The Chosen One becomes the suffering Servant (Isa 53:1-12), the sacrificial Lamb (John 1:29; Heb 10:11-13), and His church, though often oppressed, will ultimately be triumphant in the name and power of its resurrected Lord (Isa 49:6; Acts 1:8; Matt 28:18-20; Rev 14:6; 7:9-17). The bottom line of the story is God’s amazing gift of life to the human race in Christ, as Packer observes: “We revere the Bible as the God-given means whereby the Holy Spirit has made known to us God’s amazing grace and his gift of eternal life.”²

Happily Ever After

The biblical story ends with a new beginning. All things are reconciled back to God and an unblemished creation is returned to God’s people, re-created in His image, who willingly choose to embrace the Deliverer and align themselves with His plan for their deliverance from the consequences of the fall (Rev 21:1-4). Ellen White paints the picture of God’s complete restoration in clear, sublime prose:

The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love.³

¹Fackre, “Discloser,” 99.

²Packer, 28.

³Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1950), 678.

The story ends, according to Fackre, on a note of triumph: "The final chapter of our narrative points toward the consummation of the divine intention, the fulfillment of God's promise, the maturation of the Not Yet developing in the womb of the Already, incarnation and atonement."¹

The Message

Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God and the focal point of the entire scriptural story. Throughout the ages, God has used a variety of methods and media to tell His story, but Jesus is the ultimate ground and center of the story.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets in many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. (Heb 1:3a)

By way of a carefully crafted plan, Jesus, the One who is co-existent and co-eternal with God the Father, and the active Agent of creation, becomes Himself the living Word (John 1:1-4, 14) who comes to dwell with members of the human family, both to tell the story and to be the literal embodiment of the story. The ultimate identification of the Word with humans who desperately need to hear the words of the story is captured in the biblical author Paul's compelling description of the Son of God

Who, being in very nature God,
 did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
 but made himself nothing,
 taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
 And being found in appearance as a man,

¹Fackre, "Discloser," 112-3.

he humbled himself and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross! (Phil 2:5-8)

The Emphasis

It is this story of God, coming to Earth in human form and flesh, dying a death that atones for human sin, and rising to live and intercede for individuals based on the merits of His own perfect sacrifice, that constitutes the essence of good news. “The fundamental question,” according to Fackre, “given sin, is how can an estranged world be reconciled to God? Whatever we know about who and what God has disclosed finally comes down to that.”¹ The news is so good, so essential, and so compelling, that the apostle Paul finds himself eager, indeed obligated by the sheer force of its glory and indispensability, to preach it (Rom 1:14, 18).

In the earliest chapters of the story, we find God “fast-forwarding” to the first advent of Christ (Gen 3:15), offering a glimpse of the redemption to come. In its last, climactic chapters, the triumphant Christ is remembered as the “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, the Lamb who was slain . . . who was, and is, and is to come” (Rev 5:5, 12; 4:8). Clearly, Jesus and His atoning sacrifice are at the core of the revelation of God in the story told by sacred Scripture.

¹Ibid., 93.

A Grace Orientation

If the story itself is Christocentric and soteriocentric, then so must be our preaching, in every form, including narrative preaching. Like Paul, the Christian minister must be “resolved to know nothing . . . except Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). The most important thing about the most important One must be the primary theme of biblical narrative preaching. Regardless of the specific area of pastoral concern addressed in a particular homiletic proclamation, hearers must continually be brought back to the central reality of the biblical story, that there is a “God who so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Only in the face of this central reality will hearers ultimately be reconciled to God. The great motivating force for human reconciliation and transformation, according to Christ Himself, is a clear picture of His atoning act on the cross: “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (John 12:32). The goal of Christian preaching, regardless of the particular style or modality employed, must simply be to lift Jesus up for all to see.

In reflecting on his own experience in Christ, Paul reveals his own prioritized agenda for preaching:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be

called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. (1 Cor 15:3-10a)

Of the centrality of the cross in revelation and Christian witness, John Stott makes the following observation:

The fact that a cross became the Christian symbol and the Christians stubbornly refused, in spite of ridicule, to discard it in favor of something less offensive, can have only one explanation. It means that the centrality of the cross originated in the mind of Jesus himself. It was out of loyalty to him that his followers clung so doggedly to this sign.¹

In our preaching it must be the same. The good news of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, manifest on the cross, must be of “first importance.” The gospel and the gospel alone “is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16).

The Source for Preaching

The sacred Scriptures must be the primary documentary source for re-telling the good news in the act of narrative preaching. Precisely because the Bible is so uncompromising in its insistence on maintaining a place of primacy for the person of Christ and His efficacious work on our behalf, our preaching finds direction and impetus. According to Fackre, “the norm of special revelation [is] Christ revealed in Scripture.”² When Jesus tells His own story to the initially despondent travelers on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection, he does so “beginning with Moses and all the prophets,

¹John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 25.

²Fackre, “Discloser,” 111.

[explaining] to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

Fortunately, for preacher and hearer alike, the Bible presents an inexhaustible storehouse of literary treasure from which to draw both the inspiration and substance of preaching. Not all biblical data are presented in narrative form, however. The Scriptures contain a variety of literary forms, but, as Donald English notes, in both Old and New Testaments, stories are “a primary method of communication.”¹

English catalogues other literary forms which are available to the preacher: concepts, words that are “heavy with theological meaning,”² images, values, principles, commandments, and promises.³ Other literary forms in Scripture include hymns, laws, prayers, and letters.⁴ It is important for the narrative preacher to note that even these other literary forms possess either key story elements and characteristics or are couched directly or indirectly within the larger story of God’s saving activity.

Despite the presence of other literary forms in the Bible, story is clearly the dominant genre. “Remove the narrative content from Scripture and only fragments remain,”⁵ according to Ralph Lewis. In Jesus’ own public proclamation, story was often

¹Donald English, *An Evangelical Theology of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 120.

²*Ibid.*, 123.

³*Ibid.*, 123-126.

⁴Walter T. Wilson, “Journeys Toward Colossae: A Biblical Model for Preaching,” *Journal for Preachers* 22, no. 4 (1999): 31.

⁵Ralph Lewis, “The Triple Brain Test of a Sermon,” *Preaching Today* 1, no. 2 (Sept./Oct. 1985): 12.

the primary mode of communication. Mark observes that Jesus “did not say anything to them without using a parable” (Mark 4:34).

In taking a narrative approach to understanding the Bible, especially as it relates to the task of preaching, it is helpful to understand the Bible on its own terms, as a work of literary integrity. Richard Jensen asserts that “three particular speech forms appear in the earliest tradition of gospel communication: dialog, story, and poetry.”¹

Thus Jensen’s conclusion is:

If we wish to communicate the gospel we must use dialog, story, and poetry. They are the indispensable forms for communicating the gospel. The message of the gospel demands these forms if it is to be effectively communicated. We may find other useful forms as well but . . . to dispense totally with these forms is to dispense with the gospel itself. Form and content cannot easily be divorced.²

In contrast to the concerns of the historical-critical method of study, the object of literary analysis, according to Mark Powell, “is not to discover the process by which a text has come into being but to study the text that now exists.”³ This is the approach this project takes. By focusing on the text in its present form, the church is invited to be a partner in the homiletic process and to fulfill the New Testament admonition to “test all things [and] hold on to what is good” (1 Thess 5:20).

¹Richard A. Jensen, *Telling the Story: Variety and Imagination in Preaching* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), 121.

²*Ibid.*, 122.

³Mark Allen Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 7.

A Narrative Hermeneutic

Central to the task of telling God's story is rightly interpreting the biblical message prior to proclaiming it. Just because the preacher is persuaded that a narrative approach to preaching is useful and just because the Bible is the chosen source for proclamation, a positive outcome is not guaranteed. A careful work of interpretation, or hermeneutics, is necessary.

For narrative material and narrative approaches, a "narrative hermeneutic" is helpful. McClure points out that "when a *hermeneutical* approach to narrative and preaching is invoked, narrative aspects of the biblical text are related in some way to the form or content of the sermon that the preacher is to compose."¹ Understanding the wealth and variety of narrative forms and styles present in Scripture will aid the narrative preacher significantly in shaping and forming the sermon in ways that are compatible both with the form and intent of the preaching passage. A narrative hermeneutic does not supersede clearly established hermeneutical considerations and principles, it adds a dimension of understanding and sensitivity to the narrative preacher's task of faithful interpretation and proclamation of the meaning of the biblical text in a narrative mode.

It is important, for those who believe that the Bible is its own interpreter, to allow the text to speak for itself and to listen carefully to its message. Whereas Scripture intends to do something in the life of the hearer (Isa 55:11) and not just tell something, albeit something of importance, a carefully crafted narrative hermeneutic

¹John S. McClure, "Narrative and Preaching, Sorting it all Out," *Journal for Preachers* 15, no. 1 (Advent 1991): 25.

trains the interpreter to listen to what it is that God is saying in the text. The message is thus more than an understanding of an ancient text and its cultural context. It is an understanding of its message for contemporary hearers and God's purpose in delivering the text to us in terms we can ultimately understand in our contemporary world.

Beyond the process of careful exegesis, the thoughtful interpreter will seek to understand the intention of the text. Likely, its intention and function go well beyond the conveyance of mere information. In listening to the message of the Bible, the preacher will strive to understand the specific human needs the text is designed to address.

A Whole-Brain Approach

Interpreting Scripture and understanding its meaning is a multi-dimensional process. Ralph Lewis suggests a "whole brain"¹ approach to understanding Scripture and preaching. Craig Skinner summarizes the conclusions of studies suggesting that "the human brain operates simultaneously on two major levels"²:

Obviously all men and women possess a capacity to memorize and to reason. We also appear to possess a second faculty which processes and synthesizes the data we receive and precipitates perceptions from that data. We are able to sense realities intuitively which are beyond those which we must reason out to purely logical conclusions. Some research suggests that our rational awareness centers in the left hemisphere of the brain, and that our intuitive awareness centers in the right.

The left brain appears to gather and logically analyze facts and other raw

¹Ralph L. Lewis with Gregg Lewis, *Inductive Preaching* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1983), 160.

²Craig Skinner, "Creativity in Preaching," in *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, ed. Michael Dudit (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 564-5.

data. . . . Left brain functions seem strongest among scientists, and within similar rationally oriented minds.

Creative ideas appear to synthesize in the right brain. . . . Right brain strengths appear at highest levels among writers, artists, poets, musicians, and other very creative persons.

In order to function in the fullness of our humanity we must use the cognitive, rational functions of the left brain. Yet we equally need the intuitive and creative connections of synthesized insight which flow from the right.¹

In addition to the dual hemispheric understanding of the human mind, Lewis offers insight into two more important brain factors every listener brings to church: “the R-Complex” and the “Limbic System.”²

The R-Complex is located in the brain stem and appears to produce the most basic and instinctual behavior. A major issue at this level is the avoidance of tension and distasteful persons, places, and experiences. The preacher should carefully craft the message in ways that do not produce undue anxiety on the part of people responding primarily on this level. Moreover, the thoughtful narrative preacher will select texts for preaching that intentionally seek to address these concerns on the part of the parishioner.³

Lewis explains that “the limbic system or ‘visceral brain,’ closely connected to control centers for drive and emotion, responds to the feeling level of the sermon.”⁴ An awareness of the feelings of the listener and the ways in which Scripture

¹Ibid.

²Lewis, “Triple Brain Test,” 9.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 10.

addresses individuals on the feeling level is crucial to the task of effective preaching. According to Lewis, “educators estimate the emotions influence from 40-85% of all our real life, but formal education devotes only 5-10% of instructional activity to this affective domain.”¹ A rationalistic, discursive sermon—in both style and content—will do no better at lifting the learning and life-transformation curve for those who listen to our sermons.

Christ addressed the emotional dimension of life specifically in Matt 11:28-30. To those feeling weary and heavy laden, He said “come,” offering them “rest” for their “souls.”² His stories and parables reached deep into the psyche and had sticking power unparalleled in the prevailing teaching and preaching styles of His day. Matthew records that “when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (Matt 7:28-29).

As the creator of the human mind, in all its multidimensionality, Christ ignored no aspect of human nature in the communication process. Narrative preaching and telling the stories of His life and ministry have the same powerful effect on contemporary hearers as on those who heard Him first. Because Christ understands human emotions, Scripture declares, unequivocally, that we can draw near to Him in confidence (Heb 4:15-16). Preachers today must follow Jesus’ example. Narrative preaching uniquely allows us to do this inasmuch as it powerfully speaks to people’s

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

emotions and feelings, getting to the “heart” of the matter.

Getting into the Story

The hermeneutical task of preachers includes involving themselves in the “life” of the scriptural stories they select for proclamation. In so doing, they are not mere technicians, wielding the tools of exegesis and literary analysis. They are pilgrims on a journey of personal discovery and disciples who are themselves being formed by the very processes they are engaged in for the spiritual formation of their congregations. One becomes part of the biblical story in the sense that it becomes not just a once-upon-a-time narrative, but it becomes something of one’s own story. Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated that his own practice in handling a preaching passage was to “try to sink deeply into it, so as really to hear what it is saying.”¹ Listening carefully to God’s message in the text, as a preacher, is central and preparatory to enabling the people in the pews to hear and understand it for themselves.

It Takes a Community

Interpretation, we are reminded in Scripture, is never a purely personal and individualistic matter (2 Pet 1:21). In the past, holy individuals, who were part of holy communities of faith, listened to the Holy Spirit in the process of transmitting God’s message for their own and subsequent generations.

Interpreters must understand the text within the sociological and

¹Mary Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968), 110.

ecclesiological context of their own faith traditions and communities. Craig Loscalzo offers practical counsel on how to do this: “Pay attention to the events that shape our world, and evaluate these events in terms of their impact—theologically, economically, politically, socially—on all of us. Develop a hermeneutical eye for interpreting events in the same way that you interpret biblical texts.”¹ This does not suggest that meanings cannot be rendered that ultimately confront and redirect a tradition or community—even the preacher’s own—but it does mean that one cannot divorce himself or herself from the story’s meaning for the corporate body of Christ and its meaning for the local congregation. Again, Loscalzo’s insight is helpful: “When we know what our hearers go through and how the world in which they live affects them, we can minister to them through our sermons.”² Congregations will come to appreciate the preacher’s sensitivity and his or her preaching will be just that much more effective.

The Narrative Preacher and Personal Spirituality

As a member of Christ’s body, the preacher must first attend to his or her own spiritual formation before engaging in the process of forming a congregation in the image of Christ through intentional acts of ministry such as narrative preaching. Dennis Kinlaw points to the challenges preachers face in maintaining their vital connection with Christ:

¹Craig A. Loscalzo, *Preaching Sermons That Connect: Effective Communication through Identification* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 95.

²*Ibid.*, 103.

Our perpetual temptation in the ministry is to let the ministry take priority over our personal walk with Christ. We are always conscious of the pressures to put the work first. That is so easy to justify. . . .

Our security against such a drift is the development of personal devotional habits that keep Him central and that maintain a perpetual influx of His life and power. We must know the resurrected Christ and commune with Him each day.¹

The terms “spirituality” and “spiritual formation” though increasingly common, even in traditions that historically have avoided this particular language, are often bantered about with a high degree of fuzziness. Suzanne Johnson helps clarify things when she asserts that spirituality is “our self-transcendent capacity to recognize and to participate in God’s creative and redemptive activity in all of creation.”²

In pursuit of a distinctively Christian definition of spiritual formation, Sally A. Brown states that “Christian spiritual formation is the transformation, by means of disciplines both individual and corporate, of our imagination and life-practice, to the end that, in response to the Spirit of God, we become full participants in the ongoing, creative and redemptive praxis of God as expressed in Jesus Christ.”³ What is necessary for every Christian is imperative for the preacher of Christian faith and verities. Brown refers the preacher, who would engage in a process of personal spiritual formation as a part of the preparation for preaching, back to the ancient scriptural meditative practice of *lectio divina*.

¹Dennis F. Kinlaw, *Preaching in the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press, 1985), 22.

²Suzanne Johnson, *Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 22; quoted in Sally A. Brown, “Preaching as Spiritual Formation,” *Journal for Preachers* 21, no. 2 (1998): 26-27.

³Sally A. Brown, 27.

Lectio is the initial stage of this devotional practice for the narrative preacher. It consists of a measured reading of the text aloud. In so doing we are reminded of the long oral tradition in the Christian church in which members more frequently heard than read the Word of God. Reading aloud in the process of personal spiritual formation allows the Word to “resonate” within one’s ears and settle down into one’s mind and heart in ways unexperienced by readers alone.¹ In addition to the personal spiritual benefits inherent within this stage, there is value also for the narrative preacher in practicing hearing the Word of God aloud.

The hearing stage is followed by *meditatio*, a process in which the elements of the selected passage come to the fore in particularly powerful ways. It may be a particular word, a vivid image, or a phrase that arrests the attention and engages the imagination. With the psalmist, the disciple in this stage meditates on God’s Word “day and night” (Ps 1:2). The force of the original language in Ps 1:2 suggests a repeated, conscious “mulling over” or continual dwelling upon the words and ideas of the Scripture. This is an exercise far removed from the task-oriented process of searching for a pericope with “preachable” qualities for the following week’s sermon.² It is, first of all, a personal partaking of the unspeakable richness of God’s Word before turning to feed others from the same dynamic source.

As Paul suggests, Christian meditation is a conscious deepening of our experience of the things of God—a process of being personally and individually “rooted

¹Ibid., 28.

²Ibid.

and built up in [Christ], strengthened in the faith . . . and overflowing with thankfulness” (Col 2:7), “in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:2-3). The apostle’s observations certainly have particular value and application for preachers and their preliminary work of heart and soul preparation for the task of proclamation. John Stott writes of his own personal devotional and meditation time on his knees with the Word of God open in front of him: “This is not because I am a bibliolater and worship the Bible; but because I worship the God of the Bible and desire to humble myself before him and his revelation, and, even while I am giving my mind to the study of the text, to pray earnestly that the eyes of my heart may be enlightened.”¹

The movement from *meditatio* to *oratio* is signaled by the act of giving utterance to the text itself and to the fruit of its meditation in personal, audible prayer. It is “praying the text²” in the form of an “unhurried conversation with God through the images or phrases of the text.”³ With the Word of God open in front of one’s self, and its message running through one’s conscious mind, *oratio* is the “opening of the heart to God as to a friend,” as Ellen White describes it.⁴ This, too, is a spiritual discipline particularly useful for the narrative preacher. The primary objective is to be with God.

¹John R. W. Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), 222.

²Sally A. Brown, 28.

³Ibid.

⁴Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1973), 93.

The by-product of this exercise is time for the text, as we pray it, to form anew in our hearts and minds in preparation for narrative preaching.

The final movement in this traditional suite of spiritual disciplines for the preacher is *contemplatio* the process of opening one's self further to the presence of the living Christ and His Spirit in such a way that the message He has for the listening preacher and for the congregation that will hear the sermon emerges with unmistakable clarity.¹ This is an exercise in continuing to listen and meditate as one seeks not only to understand the Word but to be one with the Source of inspiration. God promises that those who faithfully seek him, when the discipline is entered into wholeheartedly, will be rewarded by His presence and fellowship (Jer 29:13). When God's word came to Daniel he fasted and prayed until God sent a messenger to bring him "wisdom and understanding" (Dan 9:1-3, 20-3).

In recognition of the challenges of the contemporary homiletic task and the spiritual needs of the preacher, Clay Oglesbee suggests two stages in addition and complimentary to this ancient, formative spiritual exercise: *silencio* and *compassio*. The discipline of *silencio* precedes *lectio* and consists of a "centering prayer" to help clear the mind, heart, and will of extraneous and conflicting matter in preparation for hearing the Word of the Lord.² This additional stage enables the narrative preacher to practice God's invitation to "be still and wait patiently for him" (Ps 37:7a); and to "be still and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10).

¹Sally A. Brown, 28.

²Ibid.

The *compassio* stage, according to Oglesbee, encompasses the actual work of crafting the sermon and delivering it to the congregation. He notes that "as *compassio*, producing and preaching the sermon becomes a discipline of service in Christ's name."¹ Narrative preachers would be well served to adopt and follow these formative spiritual exercises in preparation for preaching.

The Merging of Stories

Through a process of deep spiritual formation and formal study and preparation for preaching, the scriptural story begins to merge with the narrative preacher's own story, the story of the congregation, and stories of individual congregants leading to a proclamation event infused by the Spirit and fraught with life-transforming significance. Preaching, and especially narrative preaching, is not for the casual practitioner or the faint of heart. It is a highly intentional process to be entered into passionately and without reserve, engaging all of the preacher's heart, mind, and soul. In the final analysis, only one who has spent time with and in Christ can truly understand and rightly proclaim something of the Christian story, translating it into a powerful, relevant story which speaks to hearts and transforms lives.

Hearers of The Word

Understanding the task of narrative preaching involves understanding certain things of fundamental importance about the listeners and the milieu in which they

¹Clay Oglesbee, "From Praying to Proclaiming: The *Lectio Divina* in Sermon Formation," *Preaching* (Nov./Dec. 1989): 16-20.

live and interact. John Stott employs the metaphor of bridge-building to assist the preacher in recognizing the communicative challenge of proclaiming the gospel in the face of obstacles such as entrenched mind-sets and limited world views.¹

Theological conservatives (of which Stott is one) tend toward orthodoxy and faithfulness to the Bible, living, as it were, on the side of the theological "river" that is virtually immersed in the life and culture of the Bible's writers and generations of Christians past. Crossing over is such a challenging and often threatening prospect that they seldom venture beyond their comfort zones. In a world of rapidly changing perspectives and values, it is easy for conservatives to lapse into discontinuity and irrelevance, communicating exclusively with and for themselves.² Building bridges is tricky business. It is much easier, and can be defended in spiritual-sounding language, to stay on one's own side of the river rather than seek to span the chasm.

Theological liberals,³ on the other hand, major in "relevance," preaching sermons that are grounded in the real world but often disconnected from the world of the Bible, despite the imperative to build bridges across the gulf.

Those of us who criticize and condemn liberal theologians for their abandonment of historic Christianity, do not always honour their motivation or give them credit for what they are trying to do. The heart of their concern is not destruction but reconstruction. They know that large numbers of their contemporaries are contemptuously dismissive of Christianity, because they find its beliefs untenable, its formulations

¹Stott, *I Believe*, 137.

²*Ibid.*, 140.

³Stott uses the term liberal and also radical to describe the opposite end of the theological spectrum from the conservative, evangelical wing of the Anglican Church, of which he is a noted spokesperson.

archaic and its vocabulary meaningless. This fact causes the best liberals profound pain, and it is this which lies behind their theologizing. They are anxious to restate the Christian faith in terms which are intelligible, meaningful and credible to their secular colleagues and friends. All honour to them in so far as they are genuinely wrestling with the need to discover the modern gospel for the modern world. I wish we conservatives shared this incentive, and were ourselves neither so entrenched in antique cliches, nor so offensively complacent about our failure to communicate.¹

Stott's critique of liberals is that "in discarding the ancient formulations they tend also to discard the truth formulated, and so throw out the baby with the bathwater."²

According to Stott, our task as preachers is to avoid entrenchment on either bank of the river, seeking to bring the two very different worlds together in Christ.

My plea is that we treat [members of our congregation] as real people with real questions; that we grapple in our sermons with real issues; and that we build bridges into the real world in which they live and love, work and play, laugh and weep, struggle and suffer, grow old and die. We have to provoke them to think about their life in all its moods, to challenge them to make Jesus Christ the Lord of every area of it, and to demonstrate his contemporary relevance.³

Narrative preachers can be "bridge builders" by recasting the Bible's great stories in such a way that they faithfully communicate Christian doctrine and orthodox practices so that they are "relevant" and speak in fresh ways for the needs of a contemporary, hurting world that longs to hear the story of God's love, grace, and presence in the here and now. Stories have a unique way of getting around the prejudices of conservatives, liberals, and

¹Ibid., 143-144.

²Ibid., 144.

³Ibid., 147.

other divergent groups by helping them see and experience a new slice of life as shared skillfully by a narrative preacher's presentation of the ancient Bible stories. By recasting stories such as the "Prodigal Son," the "Woman Caught in Adultery," or "Jesus Calming the Storm," narrative preachers can offer acceptance, grace, and peace to people today.

The Narrative Life of a Congregation

Building bridges across chasms is not merely a matter of spanning theological or ideological divides, it is also a matter of understanding certain fundamental realities about the way we—and those to whom we preach—experience and engage in the lives we live. One of the primary reasons narrative preaching makes such a positive impact on the listener is that it is fundamentally in harmony with the way they live their lives. Lowry affirms that "British critic Barbara Hardy is correct in her claim that all of life is lived in narrative form—indeed, that the web of story is the fabric of human existence."¹

Whereas linear and discursive modes of thought and communication are artificial constructs, useful to be sure, story is more intuitively in touch with the normal rhythm and pattern of our lives. Humans tend to live and describe their lives episodically and narratively rather than in some sort of grand extension of formal logic. We can adjust our cognitive faculties to assimilate and apply information delivered in a more formal, discursive manner, but the cognitive barriers ordinarily associated with such learning and apprehension of ideas are lowered when the style of communication more

¹Eugene L. Lowry, "The Narrative Quality of Experience as a Bridge to Preaching," *Preaching* 6, no. 2 (Sept./Oct. 1990): 22.

naturally “fits” with the way we instinctively experience life.

The narrative style of communication produces a type of (to briefly borrow an image from pagan astrology) “harmonic convergence,” in which the planets of our lives and the narrative worlds we inhabit are optimally aligned with orbs of biblical wisdom, expressed primarily in the narrative genre, and our intuitively preferred learning modes, to create moments of genuine learning and powerful spiritual formation. As McEachern notes, “Narrative preaching tends to heighten interest in the message and, thus, enhance communication.”¹ Some preachers are embarrassed by the phenomenon of “story preaching”—by the fact that parishioners are so engaged by the narrative form that stories are “remembered when everything else sloughs away.”² Narrative preaching is labeled by some as simply “entertainment.” Such assessments are partially accurate; it is undeniable that stories entertain. Patrick Willson observes:

They amuse us. They capture our attention beyond even our conscious interest in the story. This happens and that happens. “And what happens next?” we want to know. Even when we do not like the story we may find a certain stickiness that keeps us from putting it away before it is through entertaining us.³

Neither homileticians nor congregations should, however, nurture their guilty misgivings about the entertainment quality of stories, asserts Willson:

“Entertain” comes from the Old French, *entretenir*, “to hold together,” and so do our stories “hold together” the basic “stuff” of human experience.

¹Alton H. McEachern, “A New Look at Narrative Preaching,” *Preaching* 1, no. 1 (July/Aug. 1985): 11.

²Patrick J. Willson, “Entertaining Stories,” *Journal for Preachers* 12, no. 2 (1989): 5.

³*Ibid.*, 6.

The powerful appeal of story, that is, its entertaining quality, rests in the story's closeness to immediate human experience. Experiential/existential psychotherapists suggest that the language which facilitates personality transformation is a language which stays close to the surface of human experience.¹

Christ, in His preaching, frequently employed a narrative form and style of communication. He appears to have done this precisely because He understood the fundamental reality of human experience and how to make ideas take root and live in human lives. The contemporary preacher of God's story in the context of the Christian gospel may be most effective in connecting with his or her congregation via the pulpit when a similar narrative form is skillfully and artfully employed.

The Goal of Preaching

In commenting on his own selection of stories in his telling of the good news, the apostle John acknowledges that his version is selective: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31). John makes it plain that he did not record all of Jesus' acts, but he also clarifies why he wrote and preached about Christ: so that people would understand that Jesus is the Savior of the world. Certainly this continues to be the central purpose of all preaching.

David Buttrick agrees by asserting that "the purpose of preaching is the

¹Ibid.

purpose of God in Christ, namely the reconciliation of the world.”¹

Preaching is liberation. We speak to set people free. . . . The social and psychological structures in which we live are bondage to sin and estrangement from God. Therefore, to be reconciled we will have to be set free from bondage. . . . Preaching, as it shares God’s saving purpose, will be a liberating word.²

So complete is the liberation God has provided for us in Christ that it can best be described by the apostle Paul as “a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17). Preachers are those to whom has been given the liberating “ministry of reconciliation. God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. . . . And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation” (vss. 18-19).

Though narrative preaching may be a means of the minister’s connecting with the congregation, ultimately it is a higher connection that must be preached. The purpose of preaching is to reconnect individuals with the God who loves them and from whom, through so many of life’s decisions and experiences, they have become disconnected. It is calling men and women to be “saved” both in a personal sense from the devastating individual penalty and power of sin, but also, as Buttrick points out, from the corporate dimensions of sin.

By “saved,” the scriptures envision a new social reality in communion with God; a social reality in which forgiven people are free for love and may live together as family of God. . . . The purpose of preaching, broadly

¹David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 452.

²*Ibid.*, 452-253.

considered, is nothing less than the saving purpose of God.”¹

Narrative preaching, in common with all preaching, seeks to set people free personally and corporately by helping them experience a “new reality” and by helping them live in the powerfully restored and retold redemptive stories of the Old and New Testaments. Narrative preaching can help people today become free from “Egyptian bondage”; be healed of guilt via the words, “neither do I condemn you, go and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11); and be encouraged by “seeing” and “experiencing” the risen Christ as He ascended to heaven from the Mount of Olives—all by being carried back in time through powerful, vivid storytelling, then brought back to serve God with their lives in the present. Narrative fulfills the ultimate goal of preaching, sometimes in ways not possible in other forms of preaching. That goal is addressed in the following section.

Preaching for a Response

Preaching finds its ultimate purpose in extending God’s invitation to experience liberation and atonement with Him through Jesus Christ. This calling of men and women to be saved is, of necessity, based on the finished work of Christ which was wrought on our behalf by our Savior on the cross. In the words of Paul:

We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (1 Cor 5:20-21)

Preaching is not simply an exercise to make people feel good about

¹Ibid., 542.

themselves or even about God. The ministry of reconciliation is not simply being a good “P. R. person” for Jesus; it is about calling for a response to God’s message of reconciliation. It is God “making his appeal through us” (1 Cor 5:20). As Buttrick puts it: “Preaching evokes response: The response to preaching is a response to Christ, and is, properly, faith and repentance.”¹ Peter understood this final objective of preaching clearly. In his Pentecost sermon, he concludes by imploring the congregation to “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38).

The Power of Preaching

Even though this dissertation focuses attention on narrative form and homiletic models and styles, it must be clearly understood that the power of preaching is not ultimately in theory or technique. It is not rhetorical perfection that is sought by the conscientious narrative preacher but the fulfillment of the calling to proclaim the Word of God to lost men and women. It is, as noted above, a reconciled, saving relationship with Jesus Christ and a transformed relationship with the world and the communities within which we live that is ultimately the goal of the faithful narrative homiletician.

Paul freely acknowledges that the power of preaching is not in the minister but in the message: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). The power is in the story and the story’s Author, not in the storyteller.

¹Ibid., 453.

The power of preaching is a matter of the Spirit's anointing and not of the eloquence or extraordinary wisdom of the messenger. When Christ commanded His followers to stay in Jerusalem it was not so that they could dust off their homiletic texts and bone up on their oratorical techniques, it was so that they could receive the Holy Spirit and His power in their lives and proclamations:

“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. . . . You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”
(Acts 1:4-5; 8)

A few days following Christ's instructions to His disciples, the Holy Spirit indeed came upon the company in Jerusalem and they received the promised Spirit and His power. When men and women from various walks of life and diverse customs and cultures heard Christ's disciples stand and proclaim the Word of God, miraculously, each listener heard the message in “his own language” (Acts 2:6).

After engaging in the spiritual and intellectual disciplines necessary to craft a narrative sermon for their flock, modern “apostles,” as they stand to fulfill their callings to speak for God to women and men of diverse tastes, temperaments, interests, and needs, would do well, before proceeding further, to breathe a fervent prayer for God's present-day re-enactment of Pentecost in the midst of their own congregations. As true as it was that day in Jerusalem, it is true today, that only by the Holy Spirit's power and anointing can mere words, uttered by simple servants, be translated into the language of every heart and every soul to the glory of Jesus Christ and the building up of God's kingdom. Therein lies the power of preaching!

Conclusion

It is the thesis of this dissertation that God intentionally couched His message to the human family in the form of story, the narrative of which was passed down orally from generation to generation. Today, in its codified and canonized form, the Bible still retains its essential narrative character and thrust. The pivotal event and central act in the story is the incarnation of the divine “Word.” The One whose proclamation spoke this world and the human family into existence entered Himself into the human realm in order to save, by His death and resurrection, an entire estranged human race.

The “old” stories foretold His coming to bring new life. The “new” stories celebrate that the promised One has come, and He did die for our sins, and now He is alive forevermore, “able to save completely those who come to God through him” (Heb 7:25). Combined, the stories, old and new, proclaim that God loves us unconditionally (Rom 8:38-9); that now, because of Christ, we are once again “children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

In His providence and grace, God has called men and women to serve as His ambassadors (2 Cor 5:20), to tell the story and appeal to our fellow humans in His name. Fortunately He left us His Spirit so that the daunting task need not be attempted in the frailty of human strength and intellect alone. He has promised power to all who will receive it to tell His story to an otherwise dying planet.

Telling His story today is a complex and challenging enterprise. A host of

voices vies for the human mind and heart. Alternative “gospels” abound. Ironically, because of the way humans were created in the first place, the human family appears to be “hard-wired” to hear the Story in a simple, straightforward, narrative way. Thus communication cast in a narrative framework appears to connect with them in ways that other forms and styles cannot replicate.

It is precisely this challenge (to tell the story over and again), this opportunity (to work cooperatively with the Holy Spirit), this motivation (the Love of Christ constraining), and this high calling (to serve as God’s ambassador) that catapults this preacher into the arena of narrative preaching and moves us on to the next chapter in which I examine models and develop the “how” of narrative preaching.

CHAPTER III

A DESIGN FOR NARRATIVE PREACHING: TOWARD THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL

Introduction

This chapter seeks to briefly survey the works of several contemporary authors and practitioners of narrative preaching and examine the "models" they have put forward in an attempt to establish a theoretical and practical foundation upon which to build a contemporary personal model for narrative preaching. First, a very brief background will be presented to help clarify the context in which these models arose.

Background to the Rise of Contemporary Models of Narrative Preaching

Several theological and literary trends converged in the latter half of the twentieth century to help set the stage for the emergence of interest in narrative as a form of homiletic praxis.

Northrop Frye's influential work of literary theory, *Anatomy of Criticism*,¹ published in 1957, asserted that the Bible was a definitive source of literary archetypes and should serve as the primary framework for organizing all of Western literature. In

¹Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

response, courses focusing on the Bible as literature began to appear in college, university, and even high school curricula.

James Muilenburg recognized and fueled a movement among liberal biblical scholars to produce more systematic and thorough literary studies of the Bible as a unified literary work. He called for biblical scholars to practice "rhetorical criticism," which we now know as literary criticism of the Bible.¹

Interdisciplinary studies became fashionable and biblical courses popular. Ryken suggests that the paradigm shift "occurred very informally," as "Biblical scholars and literary critics started talking together in the hallway and began teaching courses together."²

Along with paradigm shifts in biblical and literary studies came groundbreaking studies in homiletics which changed the focus from primarily sermon content to sermonic form.³ To put contemporary homiletics in the context of recent history, George Bass observes that "preaching began to turn the 'narrative corner' at the beginning of the 1970s"⁴ Richard Eslinger concurs on the flow of events in this

¹Leland Ryken refers to Muilenburg's call to "rhetorical criticism" a "watershed." See Leland Ryken, "The Bible as Literature: a Brief History," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 60. See James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969): 1-18.

²Ryken, 60.

³Sidney Greidanus, "The Value of a Literary Approach for Preaching," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, 509.

⁴George M. Bass, *The Song and the Story* (Lima, Ohio: CSS, 1984), 83; quoted in Sidney Greidanus, "The Value of a Literary Approach for Preaching," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III

emerging discipline: “With the usual cultural lag (about a decade in each case)” the work in narrative forms by literary critics and biblical scholars in the 1950s and 1960s bore its “first fruits in homiletics.”¹ He attributes the rapid rise in the popularity of narrative forms to a dearth of preaching in general in that era: “Storytelling sermons offered signs of new life in the midst of the collapse of topical preaching.”²

Narrative preaching became increasingly popular with both preachers and their congregations. The narrative approach offered some distinct advantages over the more traditional, conceptual approaches to preaching.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Narrative Preaching

Having briefly touched on a few of the factors that gave rise to narrative preaching, it is useful next to look at several of the pros and cons of the narrative approach that may give both impetus and caution to the narrative preacher.

(Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 509.

¹Richard L. Eslinger, “Narrative and Imagery,” in *Intersections: Post-Critical Studies in Preaching*, ed. Richard L. Eslinger (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 65. Eslinger credits David James Randolph’s *The Renewal of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969) as being an early, prophetic voice and Charles Rice’s explorations in a series of articles, and later in collaborative book form, with being a key representative of the first fruit of a new movement. See Edmund A. Steimle, Morris J. Neidenthal, and Charles L. Rice, *Preaching the Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), cited in *ibid*.

²Eslinger, 65.

The Narrative Advantage

Even though they are not panaceas for all that trouble preaching today, narrative approaches to preaching hold distinct advantages over more traditional, discursive methodologies.

As observed earlier in this study, one factor leading to the narrative preaching movement was an understanding that the Bible is largely narrative in form. Thus the sermon, according to Calvin Miller, can be the "servant of the Book" by serving "in narrative ways."¹ Fidelity to the Word of God means understanding Scripture on its own terms. It means coming to grips with the narrative quality of the Bible and incorporating its pattern into the pattern of one's proclamation.

As the Bible's form becomes formative for preaching, the relevancy factor for congregations will increase. According to Mark Powell, "There is increasing appreciation among scholars today for the ability of stories to engage us and to change the way we perceive ourselves and our world."² Narrative especially connects with the right hemisphere of the brain,³ sealing in, *affectively*, the cognitive content of the message which is being processed *rationally* by the *left brain*.⁴ Alton McEachern asserts

¹Miller, 104.

²Powell, 90.

³Lewis, "Triple Brain Test," 9.

⁴Donald Chatfield calls story sermons "left-handed" sermons on the basis that the right hemisphere of the brain governs the motor functions of the left side of the body, including the left hand. "The brain's right side experiences life by way of story and sense," he observes. Donald F. Chatfield, *Dinner with Jesus and Other Left-handed Story-sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 9. Foundational work in the field of brain physiology and hemispherical function was published in Robert

that "narrative preaching is a variant which elaborates the basic biblical materials and creates a sense of contemporaneity. Both the personality and the life situation of the biblical character come alive for the hearer."¹ Scott Johnston explains that narrative preachers use story not just to illustrate a point in an outline but to shape the sermon in harmony with the mind of the contemporary listener:

In the past, preachers used stories as a way to illuminate a particular doctrine. They would define, say, justification by grace through faith, and then they would use some kind of a story to illustrate it. Narrative preachers today look at story differently. For them, stories provide the shape for the sermon. Story is not just a way to illuminate something that is complex, but it's a way to form our preaching so that people can more easily listen to it and understand it. People advocating narrative say that we relate better to stories than essays.²

Narrative preaching thus provides ways not only to be faithful to the Bible but also to the needs of hearers of the Word.

The narrative advantage extends to the manner in which hearers interact and identify with characters in the story. Unique among the literature of the ancient Near East, the Bible does not gloss over the imperfection of its characters. They are presented not as larger-than-life models of how we should live our lives, for the most part, but as real, flesh-and-blood personalities in whom and through whom God is working. The uniqueness of biblical biography is not in who the characters are and "not in what the

Ornstein, *The Psychology of Consciousness* (New York: Viking Press), 1972. See also Kenneth Pelletier, *Toward a Science of Consciousness* (New York: Dell Publishing Company/Delta Books, 1978), and Eugene P. Wratford, *Brain Research and Personhood* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1979).

¹McEachern, 11.

²Scott Black Johnston, "Tell Me the Old, Old Story," *Insights* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 14.

biblical characters are doing but in what God in Christ is doing for his people."¹

Listeners are often able to personally identify with the *real* characters in the Bible their struggles, their failures, their fears, their joys, their spiritual highs and lows, and the evidences of God at work in and around them.

Rather than having to force abstractions past a congregation's cognitive barriers as is often the case in discursive forms of preaching, the narrative preacher holds the listener's attention in a more natural way. Stories are concrete and visual and connect with hearers in ways other forms simply cannot.

Richard Eslinger observes that the task of communicating with our congregation is most challenging:

For most of us, the realization has long since occurred that the old conceptual preaching simply is not heard by most of those in attendance. It has ceased to be a "Word-event"; the words go out from the pulpit, but never even find their way into the consciousness of the hearers.²

"Story snags interest," Calvin Miller reminds us. "Like a child who will not be ignored, it grasps the parent's chin and pulls the face straight with the face of the narrator. Narrative sermons force our dull minds to pay attention far more than many older sermon models."³

The conceptual outline of an oral exegesis sermon is like driving in congested downtown traffic. One can get from point A to point B successfully but only

¹Greidanus, 518.

²Richard L. Eslinger, *A New Hearing: Living Options in Homiletic Method* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 11-2.

³Miller, 104.

by means of frequent starts and stops and numerous soundings of the horn to jolt the communicative vehicle into the next "block" of the outline once the previous "blocks" and signals have been negotiated. In the words of Calvin Miller, "Each subpoint stops the mind to notch the point before banging its bumpy way on through the (oft-projected) outline."¹

By contrast, the structural flow of a narrative sermon is more like traveling a scenic byway in which the meaning is formed by the imagery along the way and reinforced by the purposeful pace and packaging of the experience. One journey can leave the listener refreshed and renewed, the other journey often ends in distraction and exhaustion.

Narrative sermons have the ability to "fix" the message of the sermon in our minds precisely because stories are easier to remember than are abstract concepts for individuals who, as we have previously noted, are narratively attuned. Miller observes that "stories have a way of staying in place when even the most cleverly contrived sermon outlines elude us. . . . The story so fixes the sermon . . . that it will not let us forget the tale that charmed us toward the truth."²

In the final analysis, story brings one back to a focus on the big picture. As noted in chapter 2, it is God's story from creation, to the fall, to the atonement, to the final reconciliation of all things that is told in the Bible. Narrative preaching returns again and again to *that* Story as *the* normative and formative Story for all of human life

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., 106.

and experience. Richard Ward observes the following:

A narrative perspective in homiletics . . . claims that we are *homo narrans*, that is, creatures who tell stories.¹ As those baptized in Christ, we bear witness to the suitability of a particular set of stories, the stories of God's action in Jesus Christ. We proclaim that such stories give order to our otherwise inchoate experience."²

Narrative preaching, by continually referencing the Story through its myriad of component stories, has the potential to continually transport us back to the source of meaning in our lives back to where we began the journey to an understanding that God loves us and sent His Son to die for us that we might receive His gift of eternal life.

The Limitations of Narrative Preaching

Narrative approaches, as previously noted, provide in many settings a preferred approach to preaching. It should be noted also, however, that narrative sermons simply will not fit every text or fulfill every sermonic objective.

The same logic that argues that the Bible is nine-tenths narrative³ also makes the case for different sermonic forms to proclaim different texts to meet different needs. Not all of Scripture is narrative and not all passages will neatly fit a narrative

¹Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss, and Robert Trapp, eds., *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1985), 255.

²Richard F. Ward, "Responses," *Insights* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 21.

³The assertion is that of Henry Grady Davis, in *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 157.

form of proclamation. Greidenus reminds the preacher, however, that biblical faithfulness goes beyond simply figuring out the particular literary form of a particular passage:

Instead of slavishly trying to copy the form of the text, preachers should carefully examine the form of the text and allow its characteristics and mood to shape the form of the sermon. Thus, if the text is a narrative, one can use the narrative form by imaginatively retelling the biblical story. But if the text is a psalm, one would not try to copy its form but instead use the mood of praise or lament and the parallelism and/or metaphors to help shape the sermon. The preacher's goal is not simply to use the same form as the text but to expound the text relevantly so as to create the same effect and response today.¹

It is apparent that some individuals are less story oriented than others.

Miller makes the following observation about the differences within our congregations:

Many are so perceptually oriented that they are not equipped to hear me on a narrative level, nor are they able to perceive on such a level. For the most choleric of these, movies and novels do not exist. Fifty percent of Americans do not read books—even novels—period! For these, metaphors but entangle their brisk computerized minds in a thick, story-like molasses through which they cannot readily swim.²

The conclusion that story preaching is a “one-size-fits-all” approach, simply because narrative is closely attuned to human nature in general, is unwarranted and may cause the preacher to “narrate over” the heads of some people.

By its very nature, as previously pointed out, narrative is inductive and open ended. This means that hearers of narrative sermons are invited to “make up their own minds” and form their own connections for “their story” and the biblical story,

¹Greidanus, 516.

²Miller, 109.

rather than having conclusions “spoon fed” to them by the preacher. While this approach offers advantages, it also carries with it a certain disadvantage. Once again, Miller observes:

Some may not be motivated to see the connection between their own life story and that of the sermon. . . . Rorschach’s ink blots prove that no two of us see or tell stories to the same conclusion. While this may be a freeing quality of the narrative sermon, is it possible that the Word of God may not come to any real encounter in the auditor’s life? If *the Word* is missed, has real preaching occurred?¹

Richard Ward agrees, when he notes that “even the storytellers among us must acknowledge that people do not all hear and come to faith in the same way.”² It is possible, after creating and delivering the most carefully crafted message, the narrative preacher will not have connected the hearer with the Scripture in the transforming way he or she had hoped. This is also true for other forms of preaching.

Another limiting factor in narrative preaching is its reliance on the skill of the narrative preachers. Some preachers may adapt well to a primarily narrative approach and find it an effective and preferred preaching modality. Others may not be nearly as effective or may not perceive the efficacy of the methodology and thus for them it will not be the best general approach to fulfilling their calling as preachers.

Noted homileticians today have cautioned that narrative preaching has the potential to head the church in the direction of a loss of the sermon’s *didache*, or teaching function. William Willimon is concerned that by shaping the sermon in

¹Miller, 109.

²Ward, 21.

harmony with post-modern culture, the content of the gospel is ultimately reduced. He criticizes some narrative sermons for being

a string of disconnected images without any transition, each image with a different degree of emotional intensity because, like TV producers, we do not want our hearers to make connections, to set thoughts in context, to raise questions of overall coherence. Nor does our congregation desire such coherence; TV has created an audience that expects to receive its information in a detached, episodic way, with emotional response, but without thought.¹

An additional down side to narrative preaching is its inherent subjectivity.

Preachers may more easily mishandle or even distort the message of Scripture in a narrative form than in the more traditional, conceptual forms where accuracy of interpretation and understanding are key objectives. It should be noted, however, that conceptual preachers may also distort the message of the Bible, in spite of the methodology's tendency toward a clear, rational understanding of the content of the Word.

Due to the subjectivity factor, listeners may misinterpret the message of even the most faithfully rendered narrative sermon. If listeners are left to "finish" the open-ended narrative, their conclusions may radically differ from those intended by both the text and the narrative preacher. Understanding this liability will cause the conscientious narrative preacher to work most carefully with the text and its narrative proclamation in order for a balance to be struck between leaving room for a listener to conclude and implying that all conclusions are morally and spiritually equal and valid.

¹William H. Willimon, "Preaching: Entertainment or Exposition?" *The Christian Century*, February 28, 1992, 204.

A Survey of Narrative Homiletics at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century

Because of the relative “youth” of the discipline and the vigorous pace of its scholarship, surveying narrative homiletics today is analogous to standing in the middle of a swiftly flowing river in order to take its measure. As one might expect in any scholarly enterprise, there is significant diversity of perspective and variety in approaches.

At present, for example, some writers are ready to pound nails into the coffin of narrative preaching, seeing it as a passing homiletic fancy that has already outlived its oxygen supply and calling for a “post-narrative” homiletics.¹ Most students of the theology and practice of preaching, however, while recognizing the method’s limitations, affirm the continuing significance of narrative approaches and would agree with Martin Thielen that “for the contemporary preacher who wants to be an effective proclaimer of God’s word, story preaching is a powerful tool.”²

The goal of narrative preaching is the same today as it was in the infancy of this movement, to interconnect, in life-defining and life-transforming ways, the sweeping story of God’s work of grace in the lives of characters both old and new old characters being those of the Bible’s narratives, the new characters representative of our

¹See, for example, David L. Bartlett, “Story and History: Narratives and Claims,” *Interpretation* 45 (1991): 229-40; also William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 47-66; both cited in Wilson, 30.

²Martin Thielen, “From Precept to Parable: A Case Study for Story Preaching,” *Preaching* 10, no. 6 (May-June 1995): 48.

lives whose stories continue to be written on the daily parchment of existence in between the inaugurated and completed work of God's Redemption in Jesus Christ.

Having briefly looked at factors leading to the emergence of narrative preaching as a recognizable discipline and having noted a few of narrative preaching's strengths and weaknesses, it is now useful to survey this growing discipline by examining representative models or approaches presented by several leading, contemporary homileticians.

Four Contemporary Models

In the last several decades, four homileticians have come to be considered "founding fathers" of the narrative preaching movement: Charles Rice, Eugene Lowry, Fred Craddock and, to a lesser degree, David Buttrick, because his approach is less transparently "narrative"¹ than the others. Each of these scholars has addressed the need for a new homiletic in unique and influential ways. In order to fit each one of the four under the shade of the narrative tent, a broad, inclusive definition of narrative preaching is necessary. In this context it will suffice to refer to narrative preaching approaches as those that focus on connecting the listener to the larger Story of God in Christ through the

¹Lowry observes that "Buttrick is not always fond of the term *narrative*—once even castigating the "recent hoopla over 'narrative preaching'." See Eugene L. Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 26. Buttrick's method, stressing, in his words, "plotted mobility rather than narrativity," leaves him in the narrative camp, nonetheless, but on the opposite end of the broad "narrative continuum" from Rice and other story-centered homileticians. See David L. Buttrick, "On Doing Homiletics Today," *Intersections: Post-Critical Studies in Preaching*, ed. Richard L. Eslinger (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 95.

use of story or specific story elements and characteristics. This is consistent with the definitions set forth in chapter 2.

Charles Rice

It is appropriate to begin our discussion of representative contemporary narrative homiletics with Charles Rice for two reasons. First, as previously noted, he is considered a “pioneer” in the linkage of literary approaches to the Bible and their applications in homiletic theory and praxis. Second, his is a homiletic model often referred to as the pure “story sermon” archetype. Rice is Professor of Homiletics at Drew University Theological School. He concurs with the observation made a generation earlier by H. Grady Davis about the importance of story for preaching:

We preachers forget that the gospel itself is for the most part a simple narrative of persons, places, happenings and conversations. It is not a verbal exposition of general ideas. Nine tenths of our preaching is verbal exposition and argument, but not one tenth of the gospel is exposition. Its ideas are mainly in the form of a story told.¹

Sensing that sermons are often dull and lifeless, preachers across the theological spectrum, according to Rice, often reach for some device by which to vivify their messages. Whether by powerful illustration of a discursive point or by some other means, such measures often fall short and only underscore the general lifelessness of the sermon.

In both of these children of the Enlightenment [liberalism and fundamentalism], preaching embodies a kind of schizophrenia. The dominant mode of communication is rationalist discourse, which appeals to only a narrow segment within the range of human personality. On the

¹Davis, 157.

other hand, when liberalism and fundamentalism typically seek a more affective response, the result is likewise divorced from life by virtue of its dependence on emotionalism.¹ "Both make for homiletical docetism: the Word does not become flesh."²

As an antidote for this malaise, Rice points the preacher in the direction of story: "We live by story, by the stories constantly being told and by the stories we tell ourselves."³

Rice's homiletic method is about immersing one's self in our world of narratively conveyed and narratively based experiences as well as in the world of the biblical story and thus, through preaching in a story mode, connecting our stories, and the narrative world in which we exist, to God's story in ways that are life transforming. He suggests that "at the most profound level of symbolization—where experience becomes meaningful—we relate our stories to The Story."⁴

This characteristically involves (1) imaginatively listening and meditating on the text, (2) entering creatively into the world of the text, especially mindful of its characters, images, and stories, and (3) thoughtful movement back and forth between the world of the Bible and the world of the preacher and the congregation—especially through the imagery of the biblical story's leading metaphor.⁵ Rice's homiletic is simple, as

¹Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 18.

²Charles Rice, "Just Church Bells? One Man's View of Preaching Today," *The Drew Gateway* 49, no. 3 (Spring 1979): 22; quoted in *ibid.*

³Steimle, Neidenthal, and Rice, 12.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 19-23.

witnessed by this summarization: “No method, in my experience, is more effective in making that connection between the person and the sermon-in-community than the simple art of storytelling.”¹

In the act of preaching, Rice envisions a critical moment of grace in which “the storyteller and the circle of listeners *bend* to each other. There is in the very nature of storytelling a posture, a leaning forward. And this is true of both the listener and the storyteller, as if the story cannot be told without this attentive *bending* to each other.”² Through this winsome image Rice invites the preacher to “step into the narrative water” and experience the method personally.

A Critique of Charles Rice’s Story-Sermon Approach

Storytelling as a homiletic method is limited by the variety of genres of biblical literature which do not readily adapt themselves to storytelling. Because some passages more naturally lend themselves to narrative delivery than others, Rice, and preachers who employ his model, may be tempted to develop a sermonic canon within the larger canon of sacred Scripture.

Rice’s story-sermon model is incomplete. To stand on the sidelines as a cheerleader and shout, “Go be storytellers,” gives little practical, step-by-step coaching for those who truly wish to develop their preaching skills along the narrative axis. A

¹Charles Rice, “The Preacher as Storyteller,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 31, no. 3 (Spring 1976), 194.

²Steimle et al., 13.

more complete "How To" manual would be especially helpful in light of Rice's claim that storytelling is at the heart of the vocation of all preachers.

Eslinger has pointed out that Rice's use of terms is also sometimes confusing: "Rice has used 'metaphor,' 'symbol,' and 'image almost interchangeably with story as he has elaborated his method. The result is a new lack of clarity at the center of the storytelling project."¹ It would appear that additional work needs to be done in defining the terms used to describe Rice's method of story preaching.²

Eugene Lowry

In his seminal book, *Doing Time in the Pulpit*, Eugene Lowry suggests that narrative or story preaching is about the "ordering of experience" more than it is the traditional homiletics of ordering ideas.³ Lowry affirms Crites's notion that "the formal quality of experience through time is inherently narrative."⁴ Or, as Ellingsen suggests of Lowry and others like him who belong to the "first family" of narrative preaching, "the shape of all human experience or of human history is understood to take the form of story."⁵

Pivotal to an understanding of narrative preaching for Lowry is the ability

¹Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 30.

²Ibid.

³Eugene L. Lowry, *Doing Time in the Pulpit: The Relationship Between Narrative and Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 11-4.

⁴Stephen Crites, The Narrative Quality of Experience, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (September 1971): 291.

⁵Ellingsen, 55.

to "order experience" by way of the narrative plot. Lowry believes that a large part of the problem with preaching today is that it has embraced a spatial paradigm. Traditionally the preacher "constructs" a sermon out of its ideational ingredients and shapes its conceptual space.¹

Seeking an alternative to "sermonic engineering" and "construction," Lowry, a professor of preaching and communications at the St. Paul School of Theology, calls for preachers to leave behind their "cherished norms about sermon anatomy"² in favor of a new paradigm which he sees as "an event-in-time, a narrative art form more akin to a play or novel in shape than to a book."³

Lowry's method is intensely practical and is set forth in several books with a disciplined economy of words. In the beginning stage, which he describes as a "state of 'wandering thoughtfulness'," the preacher thinks about the upcoming preaching appointment, jots notes, references relevant resources, and sorts through a range of possibilities.⁴ Following the initial, idea-gathering stage comes the decision stage "when we settle on the idea to be shaped into homiletical form."⁵

Most of us can identify the successful completion of this second stage as

¹Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 12.

²Ibid., 5.

³Ibid., 6.

⁴Ibid., 17.

⁵Ibid.

the moment when the question . . . about how things are going can be answered "I think I have one!" More appropriately the response could be "I think one has me!"¹

Most preachers, as they move through these initial stages look either for a textual theme or topic or for some problem or felt need within the congregation or the surrounding world to address. One may start with either an "itch" (the need) or a "scratch" (the theme) but at some point the two must intersect.²

When a theme of a proposed sermon is thrown against a problem, a sermonic idea may be born. When a problem is pushed against the gospel, the interaction may give birth to a sermon. . . . By implication, then, the way to commence sermon preparation is to determine *where* our preliminary thoughts reside whether they involve a sensed problem or a felt thematic answer. Whichever it is, we must begin looking for its opposite.³

It is precisely at the intersection of need and theme that the notion of *plot* takes center stage as a guiding force both in preparation and presentation of the sermon.

Lowry describes the function of sermonic plots as follows: "In whatever type of narrative plot, the event of the story moves from a bind, a felt discrepancy, an itch born of ambiguity, and moves toward a solution, a release from the ambiguous mystery, the scratch that makes it right."⁴

The sermonic plot, according to Lowry, consists of a specific sequence of "events-in-time." "Because a sermon is an *event-in-time* existing in time, not space a

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., 18-20.

³Ibid., 19-20.

⁴Ibid., 23.

process and not a collection of parts, it is helpful to think of sequence rather than structure."¹

The five stages in Lowry's sequence for developing sermonic plots from Scripture are not difficult to understand. They are:

1) upsetting the equilibrium, 2) analyzing the discrepancy, 3) disclosing the clue to resolution, 4) experiencing the gospel, and 5) anticipating the consequences. My students have found it helpful to remember these steps with the following abbreviations: 1) Oops; 2) Ugh; 3) Aha; 4) Whee; and 5) Yeah.²

In addition to thoughtfully outlining a rationale and methodology for sermonic plots, Lowry makes a major contribution to the narrative field through his reflections on time. Since narrative plot inevitably involves an understanding of time (set over against space) in Lowry's analysis, he carefully distinguishes between outward time, *chronos*, and inward, or subjective, time. Preaching is a complex enterprise precisely because within the context of the *chronos* time of the sermon, "there are as many inner clocks as there are listeners all ticking at different speeds."³ In addition to objective and subjective time, Lowry identifies *kairos* as the "right time," not as another category, but as an "event time," "which implodes two or three other kinds of time."⁴

As interpreted by Lowry, *kairos* is most fully occasioned by story, not only stories on film and stage, but those of liturgy and preaching as well. By the liturgical reenactment of the biblical story, the worshipers become participants in it, or it becomes contemporaneous with them. Such

¹Ibid., 25.

²Ibid.

³Lowry, *Doing Time*, 32.

⁴Ibid.

a reliving of the biblical story evokes *kairos*, the right time.¹

In his book, *How To Preach a Parable*, Lowry illustrates four practical approaches to the use of time in the pulpit, as he defines it, in plotting story sermons, offering examples and commentary on each approach: "running the story," "delaying the story," "suspending the story," and "alternating the story."² In each case, "listening" carefully to the text is of utmost importance in designing the sermon based on the text.

By "running the story," Lowry refers to the process of "following the biblical story (parable or narrative account) through the actual flow provided by the biblical text itself."³ Thus "the shape of the text will be the shape of the sermon." Of Lowry's four approaches, this is generally the one most easily grasped by the narrative preacher.

In the process of "delaying the story," according to Lowry, "there are pastoral reasons to begin the sermon with a current congregational concern, which then will turn to the text for resolution."⁴ This approach is particularly useful when dealing with a passage of Scripture that is short or has within it the resolution to a pastoral or

¹Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 70.

²Lowry, *Parable*, 38-40.

³Ibid., 38.

⁴Ibid.

congregational concern. Sometimes this is a good approach when the preaching passage is so familiar that to begin with it might risk losing the listeners and the overall impact of the sermon.¹

"Suspending the story" is a common device of narrative preachers who purposefully move away from the story itself in order to achieve an important sermonic goal. Lowry observes that

it may be that the preacher will move to a contemporary situation in order to "find a way out." Perhaps another text will do the trick. Maybe a flashback to a previous section of the biblical material (such as a previous chapter) will provide a clue to the resolution. It is possible that sharing a major piece of exegetical research will be required.²

The sermon employing this approach ends by returning to the main text to complete or underscore the point of resolution.

The final design for narrative preaching proposed by Lowry is "alternating the story." In this approach "the story line of the text is divided into sections, episodes, or vignettes, with other kinds of material filling in around the biblical story."³ A sermon of this type may begin with one text and move to another. It may consist of a contemporary story that runs parallel and somewhat "simultaneous" with the text, or the interspersing of various types of homiletic material throughout the whole. This approach is particularly subject to homiletic abuse and, according to Lowry, bad examples of this

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., 39.

³Ibid., 40.

type abound. When at its best, however, "it is both a fascinating and a powerful form of narrative preaching."¹

With Lowry's approach and its various forms surveyed, a brief critique of his methodology follows.

A Critique of Eugene Lowry's Plot Approach

Whereas in Rice one finds primarily a story-sermon "pep rally," one finds in Lowry's method a practical "strategic plan" for narrative preaching through the development of narrative plots. Lowry provides a clear conceptual base and helpful methodological guidelines for implementing his model. His method appears to be a good "fit" with what is observable about human experience. According to Johnston, "Lowry contends that people naturally organize their thoughts in the shape of a plot one that runs from ambiguity to resolution."²

One shortcoming in the Lowry method is that even though the scope of preachable material is expanded beyond Rice's model to include narrative plots, this approach still imposes certain limitations on the number and types of texts for effective preaching.³ Some writers have suggested that another shortcoming of the Lowry

¹Ibid.

²Johnston, "Old Story," 7.

³Bill Oudemolen argues that this limitation is not severely disabling, however. "Obviously this is easier with narrative literature, but every text is set in a context, in a story and a situation. And every situation has some disequilibrium or tension." See Bill Oudemolen, "How to Preach Like John Grisham Writes," *Leadership* 17, no. 4 (Fall 1996): 91.

paradigm lies in the inordinate amount of sermon time devoted to outlining the problem, or, to use Lowry's own term, "introducing the ambiguity."¹ Scripture itself, however, devotes a large number of column inches to describing the human condition before a solution is introduced, so perhaps this criticism is not entirely valid. Frederick Buechner rightly observes that

the Gospel is bad news before it is good news. It is the news that man is a sinner, to use the old word, that he is evil in the imagination of his heart, that when he looks in the mirror all in a lather what he sees is at least eight parts chicken, phony, slob. That is the tragedy. But it is also the news that he is loved anyway, cherished, forgiven, bleeding to be sure, but also bled for.²

Lowry's method seeks to tell the truth about the human condition and then illuminate the solution that is present in the person of Jesus Christ. His careful, step-by-step analysis of the narrative sermon development process can provide helpful guidelines for the narrative preacher desiring to grow in the discipline.

Fred Craddock

What others have referred to as discursive preaching (the "three-point sermon," for example), Fred Craddock, former professor of New Testament and homiletics at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, rightly refers to as the deductive methodology. It is a popular preaching style, most conducive to the death of contemporary congregations, according to this homiletician. Deductive sermons move

¹See Eslinger's critique in *A New Hearing*, 87-88.

²Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1977), 7.

from a declaration of a universal truth to particular points of "proof" or support and on to application of that truth. In its place, Craddock proposes an inductive methodology that moves in the opposite direction, from particulars to universal truth or conclusion.

Movement is the key, according to Craddock, and "method is the message. . . . *How one preaches is to a large extent what one preaches.*"¹

Scott Black Johnston declares Craddock's 1971, book-length treatment of inductive preaching, *As One Without Authority*, to be a "pivotal text in homiletic theory," which constructed "the foundation for the methodological predilection that has consumed homiletics for the last two decades narrative preaching."² William H. Willimon, who is generally an outspoken critic of much of the narrative preaching movement, freely acknowledges his indebtedness to Craddock and the sweeping nature of the latter's influence on contemporary homiletics when he asserts that "Fred Craddock single-handedly changed the course of twentieth century preaching."³

Deductive methods have a hierarchical quality about them that is often counterproductive to learning and spiritual formation the authority figure announces the universal truth and then supports it with a series of particulars as "proofs." In its worst manifestations it represents a condescension, a "talking down" to the audience. It puts distance between the "teacher" and the "student."

¹Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority: Essays on Inductive Preaching* (Enid, OK: Phillips University Press, 1974), 52.

²Scott Black Johnston, "Who Listens to Stories? Cautions and Challenges for Narrative Preaching," *Insights* 2, no 2 (Spring 1996): 4.

³William H. Willimon, "Gospel Stories," *Christian Century* 110, no. 3 (Jan. 27, 1993): 76.

Craddock recommends an inductive approach that is "democratic" in its assumption that others are just as capable as the minister of arriving at universal principles, without having to be "told" the "point" of the sermon by an authoritative member of the clergy. Inductive preaching helps the listeners *discover* truth for themselves.

Craddock compares his approach to that of Søren Kierkegaard's "indirect" method of writing.¹ It is more in the role of a facilitator and fellow traveler that the inductive preacher enters the pulpit to gently "guide" hearers in the direction of a "simultaneous discovery" of God's message through a particular passage of Scripture. Willimon's summary is enlightening: "Fred introduced us to Kierkegaardian 'indirect communication' slipping in the gospel through the back door, jumping people from behind, as Jesus loved to do."²

In order to practice inductive preaching it is imperative that careful interpretation and proclamation go hand-in-hand, initiating a "conversation" between the text and the listener. When the following factors are present in the sermon, the inductive method has the potential to reach its apex: movement from congregation's experience to point of departure in the text; unity in the sense of a central point to the sermon, rather than several points in an outline; and imagination active throughout the sermon, rather than at specific illustrative junctures. Evoking anticipation of that moment of

¹Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 79-100.

²Willimon, "Gospel Stories," 76.

understanding that comes at the end of the sermon is "a primary burden of movement in a sermon."¹

Because story is an inherently inductive means of communication² Craddock's approach is a particularly useful approach to the task of narrative preaching. Inductive sermons tend toward narrative approaches and narrative approaches of all sorts tend toward the inductive, as opposed to the deductive, model. The deductive narrative sermon begins with the details and lets the "point" of the sermon arise from a careful "telling" and "imaging" of the particulars in a movement toward a designated moment of "discovery." In so doing, this approach has built-in strengths for the narrative preacher.

A Critique of Fred Craddock's Inductive Approach

Craddock is to be commended for his uncompromising emphasis on solid exegesis of the text and on the role and function of language. His flaws, though minor, are common ones: limitation of the number of "preachable" texts and a lapse back into discursive (deductive) modes, in spite of himself.

Willimon offers this assessment of Craddock as a preacher: "His stories have preached not only what the text preached but as the text preached—narratively, engagingly, accurately." Of this teacher of homiletics, and patriarch of a still lively movement, Willimon's observation is again poignant:

Before Craddock, preachers spoke of the 'point of a sermon,' or 'sermon

¹Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 166.

²McLellan, 107.

construction,' or 'the outline of a sermon.' Since Craddock, we have been free to allow a sermon to roam across many images, across a multiplicity of 'points,' and to . . . end . . . before it is done, allowing it to stew awhile in the listener's mind.¹

In the end, Craddock's approach has been helpful in advancing the cause of narrative preaching and continues to have significant impact on the field of narrative homiletics.

David Buttrick

David Buttrick's lament on the obsolescence of old methods has become a familiar cant: "For nearly three hundred years, preaching has been trapped in a rationalist bind."² Buttrick's method proposes a way to break free into a new homiletic approach.

Buttrick rejects the methodological reduction of a pericope to a single theme or general idea the standard approach in discursive styles and a feature of Lowry's method, as well. Biblical passages, for this Vanderbilt professor of homiletics, are far more like "films" than even "still-life" pictures.³ They display movement of thought, event, or image.

Extending the moving-picture metaphor, Buttrick reflects on the phenomenon that "attention span is brief not more than four minutes to a single

¹Willimon, "Gospel Stories," 77.

²David G. Buttrick, "Preaching the Christian Faith," *Liturgy* 2, no. 3 (Spring 1988): 54.

³See Buttrick, *Homiletic Moves*, 55-68, for a full treatment of the film-making and camera analogies.

conceptual idea."¹ As in a good film, images are formed quickly and one segues into another until, in the end, the impression the director was intending to convey is formed in the consciousness of the viewer. Buttrick suggests that in a twenty-minute sermon "we can only discuss perhaps five, and certainly no more than six, different subject matters in sequence."²

Though public address cannot present many ideas in a short time, public address can form understandings profoundly, so that they become embedded in the lives of people. We will be irritated at what will seem the intellectual limitations of public address as long as we fail to see what it *does* do, namely, *form* faith consciousness.³

It is precisely this phenomenon of faith formation through a movement of images that is at the heart of the Buttrick method.

In speaking of the power of public address to accomplish faith formation, Buttrick obviously assumes the performative function of language. Language is "trying to do something to an attendant listening consciousness."⁴ In preparing to preach the preacher must attend to this intentionality of scriptural language within the context of the consciousness of the listeners.

Buttrick is far more interested in the phenomenon of faith formation than in a particular, pre-determined normative structure for its accomplishment. He explains:

¹Ibid., 26.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴David G. Buttrick, *First Steps for a New Homiletic*, prod. Board of Discipleship, The United Methodist Church, 55 min., 1983, video cassette; quoted in Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 143.

"We do not talk about a story, or even tell a story, so much as imitate a consciousness hearing and reacting to a story. The preacher *shares* consciousness with a congregation and represents hermeneutical consciousness grasping a story."¹ The object for the congregation is not so much to hear the sermon as to have it form in their consciousness.

By his focus on how men and women experience the biblical Story and how it forms it their consciousness, Buttrick's phenomenological approach is the least transparently narrative and, at least on the surface, the most esoteric of the narrative preaching models surveyed in this dissertation. Yet it is precisely this quality that places the approach clearly in the narrative homiletic camp. A good story is more than the mechanics of plot, character and even imagery. It is first something to be experienced, and then, perhaps, something to be examined. By his stimulation of the imagination through liberal use of imagery, Buttrick once again ties himself tightly to the narrative mast, providing yet another positive and creative approach to the multifaceted enterprise of narrative preaching.

A Critique of David G. Buttrick's Phenomenological Approach

Buttrick's contribution to preaching is original and challenging to follow. He avoids the problems associated with the primacy of story or plot and seeks, unlike Craddock, to connect exegesis and proclamation through the principle of sermonic moves, allowing the Bible to develop its own form and movement for the sermon rather than imposing a structural overlay on the text.

¹Buttrick, *Homiletic Moves*, 362.

The challenge of the phenomenological method lies in its lack of approachability for many classically trained exegetes, as well as the average preacher. Phenomenology presents a dense forest of unfamiliar terms and concepts and the Bible does not always make readily apparent its own underlying "logic."

Better than most homileticians, however, Buttrick understands the challenges faced by communicators of The Story today:

We live "between the ages." All of a sudden our well-worn ways and means of doing things seem to be up for grabs. The sciences, the arts, the humanities are all undergoing profound revision. Evidently our cultural turbulence is not merely a matter of mild social change but a revolutionary moment something akin to the collapse of the Greco-Roman world or the breakdown of the medieval synthesis. The language we speak is undergoing massive reconstruction; the customs to which we cling no longer seem viable; our worldview is being completely rebuilt. In such a moment, not surprisingly, preaching is also in flux.¹

Better than most homileticians, Buttrick also knows where preachers and congregations need to end up in their homiletic processing. What is lacking, however, is a practical "handbook" for Buttrick's phenomenological hermeneutics and homiletics. Although nearly 500 pages in length and filled with a considerable breadth of insight, Buttrick's *Homiletic Moves and Structures* is not such a resource.

Buttrick avoids the usual approaches to narrative preaching such as simply telling a story, developing a plot or progressing through the sequences of an inductive sermon. In a clear sense he sees his model as "beyond story."² In Buttrick's homiletic

¹David G. Buttrick, foreword to *Preaching Sermons That Connect*, by Craig A. Loscalzo (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 9.

²Buttrick, *Homiletic Moves*, 13.

world topical/biblical preaching has its place in "naming" the presence of God in a world where the Divine is often ignored. Just as "naming" has its place, so does "story," according to Buttrick.¹ Indeed the two must function together, according to this creative approach:

If preaching speaks boldly then, perhaps, like astonished Adam, once more we may walk God's mysterious world, name it good, and see ourselves with tender wonderment as characters in God's great story of salvation.

Story and naming are the stuff of Christian preaching.²

Buttrick's method is not an easy method to grasp, much less to master. His reliance on story elements and characteristics, particularly imagery, and his concept of faith which is imagistically formed in a narrative context clearly make his approach worth pursuing, however, for one who is interested in narrative approaches to preaching.

Eslinger's Approach to Synthesis

Richard Eslinger's scholarly work in the area of narrative preaching is of a more recent vintage than that of the four previously discussed, "first-generation" narrative homileticians. An active practitioner, pastoring an United Methodist congregation in Cincinnati, Eslinger's analyses of earlier schools of thought have been helpful in the formation of this present study. It is possible to see Eslinger's approach as a fifth "model" for narrative preaching but the approach of this study is to characterize the essence of his approach not as an additional model but as a thoughtful interaction and

¹Ibid., 20.

²Ibid.

synthesis of the story intensive model of Rice and the image intensive model of Buttrick. Narrative preaching at its best, according to Eslinger, operates in the “middle ground” as a continuous interaction between the narrative and imagery poles.¹

Whereas the earlier homileticians made positive gains in the area of understanding theories and methods of narrative and imagery, by the late 1980s, Eslinger was already pointing to the importance of the relationship between the two. He predicted the future when he suggested that “a deeper hermeneutical plowing may quite possibly produce an even more productive methodological yield for the storytellers.”² To that end, he bridged future and present with the publishing of his *Narrative and Imagination: Preaching the Worlds That Shape Us* in 1995.

Having grounded his approach in the interplay between story and image, Eslinger then turns his attention to the explication of his “middle ground” approach which suggests that both must remain in the fore and both must be allowed to play their respective roles in understanding the text and preaching it to the congregation. In certain pericopes, of course, the story will be the obvious and dominant thing. Story approaches already discussed may be useful both in interpretation and in proclamation. In other texts, little or no story line will be present as a primary feature. Narrative may be present only as the pericope relates to the larger Story. The text may, however, contain compelling imagery that can prove useful in hermeneutics and preaching.

¹Richard L. Eslinger, *Narrative Imagination: Preaching the Worlds That Shape Us* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 170-171.

²Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 180.

In concluding his discussion of the relationship between narrative and image for preaching, Eslinger offers this summation:

What originally seemed a polar model (narrative predominating on one side and imagery on the other) must give way to a more tensive and mobile understanding. . . . So, preaching biblical narrative and the imagery of biblical faith methodologically comes to have no end; the narratives and the images of our faith turn and return to a dance-like weaving. And that dance will come to a resting place only at the end of the age.¹

Eslinger's approach is useful in its call for the church to continually "loop" between the narratives of the Bible and the rich imagery therein as both a means of understanding Scripture and as a method of proclamation with a view to faith formation. His approach, however, is less a working model for homiletic praxis than it is an intense examination of the intricacies of various theories of imagination, imagery, narrative, and narrative hermeneutics.

A Critique of Richard Eslinger's Narrative-Imagery Approach

Richard Eslinger adds significantly to the field of narrative hermeneutics and homiletic praxis when he underscores the importance of the ongoing dynamic interrelationship between narrative and imagery. This central, integrating concept is important but a great deal of work remains to be done in walking this valid concept through the necessary methodological stages of application in sermonic development.

One looks in vain for a relatively easy to apprehend, step-by-step approach for developing sermons that take advantage of the excellent middle ground

¹Ibid., 170-1.

Eslinger has staked out. Simply put, he is long on theory and short on application, despite his several helpful examples, complete with commentary, of sermons which seek to employ this approach.¹ Many preachers may give up partway through the author's esoteric discussions of theories of narrative and imagery. Needed still, then, as is the case with certain others in the field, is a workable "manual" for preachers wanting to put this approach into practice in their congregations on a regular basis.

Eslinger's insistence on maintaining a healthy "tension" between narrative and imagery is a call for inclusiveness and dynamism and will bear good fruit when applied to the situations of local pastors and parishes. Perhaps the best that can be said is that Eslinger provides a capable and sweeping tour of the intellectual marketplace that interacts with the task of homiletics today and points in the direction of an integration of two excellent working models for narrative preaching. In doing so, he helps set the stage for the development of my comprehensive, integrative model for narrative preaching which I have outlined and employed in this project.

Development of an Integrative Model for Narrative Preaching

This chapter moves now to a description of the integrative model for narrative preaching employed in this project. One will see in this approach elements of the four models surveyed and a conscious attempt to integrate the perspectives and approaches of each into a single preaching design. In so doing, Eslinger's placement of narrative and imagery on an integrated continuum serves as a useful paradigm. The

¹See *ibid.*, and Eslinger, *Narrative Imagination*.

design for this project suggests that the best narrative sermons are those that manifest some of the best qualities of each of the story, imagery, plot, and inductive approaches.

It is the premise of this project's design that a true "type" of any of the four approaches surveyed—story, plot, inductive, imagery—exists only in the rarified air of academic analysis. At best, the models put forward by Rice, Lowry, Craddock, and Buttrick emphasize a single, dominant aspect of the narrative enterprise over the others. In reality, however, each of the four models intersects in important ways with the conceptual and performative area of the other models, despite their proponent's best intentions to set forth discreet approaches.

For example, stories are never without their own internal plot sequences and inductive methods come to life through the recognition of rich biblical imagery. Eslinger's partial integration of models represents an advance in the field of narrative homiletics through his recognition of the relationship and dynamic tension between two of the four main "types," namely, story and image.

Each of the four major models discussed—story, imagery, plot, and inductive—has distinctive strengths and shortcomings. The best narrative preachers will recognize the strengths of each model and the relationship between all four models and seek to employ something of the best of each approach in their preaching.

It may be useful for the narrative preacher to imagine the four major narrative preaching models surveyed in this dissertation as occupying one each of the four quadrants of a simple visual matrix that illustrates the proximity and relationship between the models (See figure 1, page 93).

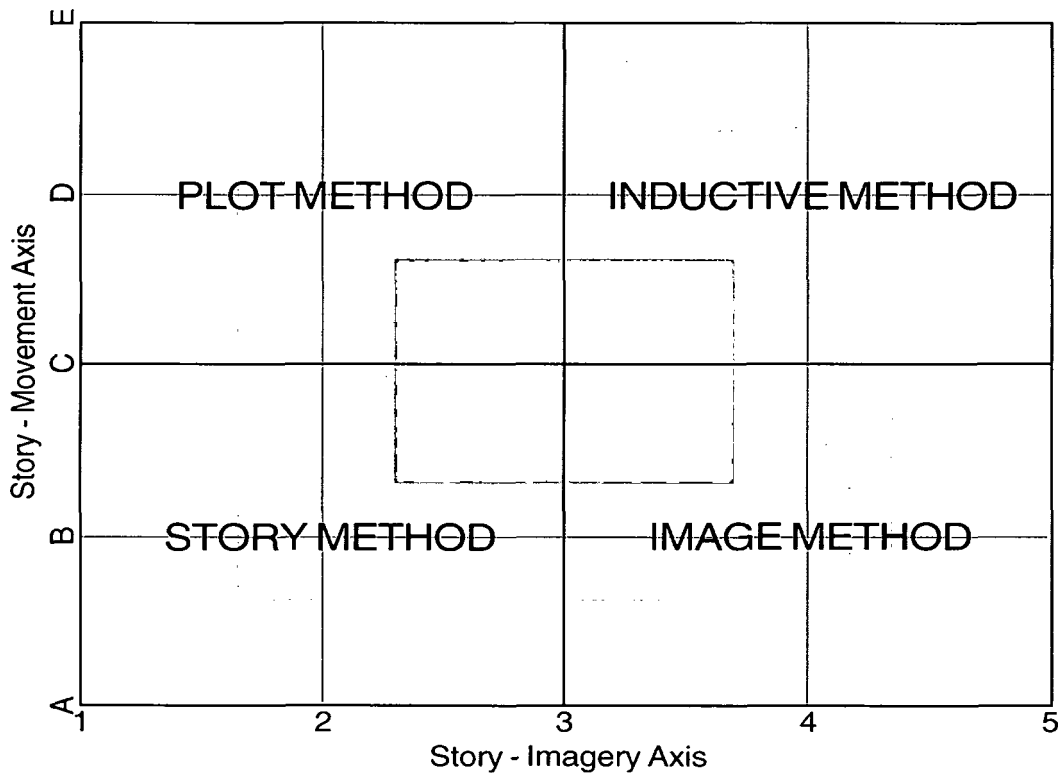


Fig. 1. The Narrative Homiletic Matrix

The four outside corners of the matrix represent the “pure type” of one of the models. Movement from the corner toward the center of the matrix, i.e., toward the shaded areas, represents sermonic movement in the direction of integrating elements of several of the models in the preaching process. For example, a sermon perceived to be at the C-2 point in the matrix indicates that the sermon has characteristics in common with both the story and the plot method. Rather than occupying separate and insulated universes, the four methods surveyed in this study are actually related in that they represent distinct aspects of a single, larger, narrative whole.

The “B-3” intersection on the matrix represents the area of Eslinger’s ideal “middle ground” between the narrative and imagery poles. The “C-3” intersection, the center of the matrix, represents a narrative sermon which has an ideal balance between the various narrative elements around which the four major models have been built—story, imagery, plot, and inductive progression. The center of the matrix, then, represents a hypothetical ideal for narrative preaching.

It must be immediately recognized, however, that very seldom, if ever, will a sermon be at the typical ideal balance and integration point of absolute center on the matrix. Moreover, many sermonic objectives may be better served by development in the direction of one or several specific models. Even at such points, however, it is useful to be reminded of the proximity and elements of the other models in the matrix. Often a narrative sermon will be characterized by an intentional “gravitation” in the direction of one dominant approach. This “gravitational pull” will be determined by both the weight of careful exegesis and interpretation of the text for preaching and the preacher’s objective for a particular sermon.

The ideal center of the matrix is a hypothetical construct only and is useful merely as a theoretical target underscoring the possibility of and desirability of integration. When the practical task of preparing real messages from God’s Word for real congregations is undertaken, the theoretical center will intentionally give way to the “gravitational pull” of both hermeneutical and homiletic considerations. A brief description of how this “works” is presented within the context of the integrative model for narrative preaching that is explicated in the following section.

An Integrative Model for Narrative Preaching

Characteristics of Narrative Preaching

At the beginning of the process of developing narrative sermons under the guidelines of this model, it is useful to review and summarize the basic characteristics of narrative preaching expressed and implied in this study and in its integrative model. The ideas briefly set forth below are indicative of an integration of the four major models surveyed, they are characteristics of narrative preaching in general, and they are foundational to the development of the project's model, the sermon series along the lines of the model, and the evaluation instrument used in assessing the impact of the sermons on a representative group of listeners.

Narrative preaching employs contemporary language

Narrative preaching avoids technical-sounding biblical and theological terminology which may be meaningless to secularized hearers. It is a conscious effort to recast biblical realities in common, everyday words, symbols and images.¹ Other modes of preaching may also employ contemporary language.

¹Among the other characteristics in McLellan's "bare-bones" description of narrative preaching is this useful reminder about the simplicity and creativity of the language employed in the narrative homiletic process. For his complete outline, which served as a basis for this section of the study, see McLellan, 107.

Narrative preaching is dialogical

Narrative preaching carries on a dialogue between God's story and ours, weaving the two together into one narrative whole.

Narrative preaching is concrete

Preaching, in certain sectors, is seen primarily as an abstract, didactic exercise. Narrative preaching seeks rather to inhabit the very real world of concrete realities—the world in which hearers live—with a message of hope and grace.

Narrative preaching is inductive

Rather than abstracting one idea and then drawing conclusions or deductions from it to apply to our lives, narrative preaching seeks to reveal the particulars through the process of examining the whole in story form.

*Narrative preaching is indicative
more than imperative*

It shows more than it tells. It provides the framework and invites the hearer to assemble the parts.

Narrative preaching has a central plot

Instead of being an outline of points and ideas, a narrative sermon will allow the ideas to emerge from the narrative elements themselves. It will provide a problem or conflict and move to a climax through the narrative, and, in the end, bring about resolution of the conflict through the biblical message.

Narrative preaching is personal

The story sermon deals with persons and experiences with which hearers can identify. Christ's parables followed this pattern.

Narrative preaching relies on "images" more than "ideas"

Narrative preaching is a "right brain" and "left brain" enterprise. It seeks to communicate wholistically, speaking especially well, in creative ways, to the often-neglected right, or more affective, hemisphere" of the human experience.

Narrative preaching encourages listeners to apply lessons to their own lives

The congregation must "finish" the sermon and the narrative preacher must have confidence that the Holy Spirit will do His work of bringing forth proper fruit once the seeds are sown. There may well be a call to commitment, but no formulaic, ready-made response articulated by the narrative preacher.

A Step-by-Step Approach

In practical terms, the model for narrative preaching employed in this project involves ten basic steps which are outlined below.

Prayer for God's guidance

The design begins intentionally with a prayerful attitude of submission to God's direction throughout the process of sermon development and deployment. Guidance is necessary in both the selection of the text for preaching and in the preparation of the narrative sermon.

Listening for God's voice

The prayerful attitude continues in this step as the preacher petitions God for guidance both in *what* to preach and *how* to preach it. The answer may come in the form of the Spirit's reminder of particular needs within the congregation or in the form of an emerging theme from the preacher's personal meditation on God's word.¹

Understanding and plotting the sermon

Once the text for preaching is decided upon, a careful listening to the Word ensues, with reference to the Narrative Homiletics Matrix (see Fig. 1, page 93). This simple chart can help one *visualize* the form of the text (whether it is primarily story or image intensive, for example) and the best approach to preaching the text (whether to approach the sermon as a narrative plot, a set of phenomenological moves through which faith is formed, or some blending of these and/or other models). It can be useful to "plot" such visualizations of these perspectives on the matrix. One simple way to consciously reference the matrix is to write "F" (for form) on the intersection that most closely corresponds to the apparent form of the text itself and then to write "P" (for preaching) on the intersection of the matrix that best illustrates the emerging sermonic strategy. Sometimes "F" and "P" will occupy the same point on the graph or points in close proximity to each other. At other times, in pursuit of different sermonic objectives, the two may be at different points on the matrix.

¹Lowry, *Homiletical Plot*, 18.

Selecting the tools

Two types of tools are referred to here for the preacher preparing a narrative sermon. When it is sufficiently clear where to mark the “P” on the matrix, it will be helpful to review the specific tools associated with the preaching model that thus emerges as dominant. Since this design is intentionally inclusive, it will be useful also to quickly review the characteristics of sermons in the other quadrants of the matrix, especially those in closest proximity, but not so as to eclipse the dominant model.

The preacher’s specific tools of exegesis and sermon development will also be selected and employed at this point. This selection should be governed to some degree by the form of the text (“F”) and the sermonic strategy (“P”) on the matrix.

Employing the dominant model

To the best of his or her ability, the narrative preacher will, at this juncture, attend to the development of the sermon within the context of the specific model that appears to play the dominant role. This may well involve returning to and briefly reviewing the literature associated with the dominant model in an attempt to faithfully employ the model and achieve its desired outcomes.

Cross-referencing with the other quadrants

Once again, briefly this time, the non-dominant models will be recalled and referenced to see to what degree the approaches inherent within each may be integrated into the emerging sermon with reference to the finished homiletic “product.”

Hearing the message

Setting the visual matrix aside at this point, it is useful for the preacher to imagine himself or herself in the pew “hearing” the word of God read. Vocalizing the text itself is a good way to accomplish this. Often areas of emphasis are better determined by *hearing* the text read aloud than by merely *seeing* the words on the printed page. This sets the stage for the next phase in the process, which is the development of an oral manuscript.

Preparing an oral manuscript

The preparation of an oral manuscript begins with the recognition that the way we speak is different from the way we write. It involves hearing the sermon in one’s ears more than seeing the sermon on paper. The oral manuscript may take a variety of forms¹ and there is not necessarily a wrong way to do it except to ignore the counsel of Richard Lischer, who exhorts the narrative preacher to “Write for the ear.”² Lischer further observes:

The more oral the minister’s sermon preparation, the more aural (and intelligible) will be the final product. This will undoubtedly entail simpler sermon designs, the use of formula repetition, less precision and analysis, and a return to the great preaching themes and stories of the Bible.³

¹A useful guide in the preparation of the oral manuscript is Richard Carl Hoefler, *Creative Preaching and Oral Writing* (Lima, OH: C.S.S. Publishing Company, 1978).

²Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), 79.

³Ibid.

Characteristics of an oral manuscript are the placement of words and markings on the page to underscore (often literally) words and phrases that require vocal emphasis. This may be done through the creative use of indentation, capitalization, underlining and special notations and symbols that enable the “reader” of the manuscript to sound *natural* and *conversational* in speech. The ultimate goal is a sermon manuscript which, if used in the pulpit, will help give the sense of a story told rather than a lecture delivered. The former is engaging, the latter stupefying.

Committing an outline to memory

The ideal is to carefully prepare the manuscript but not carry it into the pulpit or to bring only an abbreviated outline in front of the congregation to prompt the preacher in the delivery of a message which has been largely committed to memory. Fortunately, narrative forms, with their inherent images and movements, are easier to commit to memory than are traditional discursive outlines. The process of visualizing the imagery and the movements of the sermon becomes a synergistic partner in the delivery process. Visualization enhances the retention of the message and the retention of the material in imagistic forms enhances the delivery of the message. A multi-media and multi-sensory approach (seeing, hearing, imagining, sensing) to both memorization and delivery will improve the overall impact of the preaching.

Delivering the narrative sermon

The final step is the event of preaching itself in which all of the prayers and preparations converge through the power of the Holy Spirit to engage the hearts, minds, and imaginations of hearers in life-transforming and faith-enhancing ways

through the act of proclamation. Preparation is a vital key to “success” in this final, consummative stage. Preparation provides the “freeing” confidence that releases the preacher from inhibiting fear and self-consciousness, replacing fear with a keen consciousness of the message, so that the Master of the message and His purpose shine through clearly.

Getting into the Game

Narrative is, at once, a thing both simple and complex. Its nuances will not be exhausted by the narrative matrix and integrative model presented above. Hopefully, however, this design for narrative preaching’s simple visual tool and the practical steps outlined in the previous section will provide a form within which the boundless freedom and creativity of the narrative medium itself can produce, time and again, preaching moments filled with wonder, grace, and transformation. It is hoped, too, that the model that produced this project’s series of narrative sermons will be sufficiently clear and practical so as to encourage preachers to give the method a try; that is, in the spirit of Hans Gadamer’s fun and useful metaphor, get out of the huddle and into the “game.”¹

Now that this project’s integrative model for narrative preaching has been formulated and outlined above, chapter 4 will focus on the implementation phase of the

¹See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Play of Art,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1986), for an explication of the role of imagination as “play.”

project in which the model is employed in the development and presentation of a series of narrative sermons and the result of this homiletic work is evaluated.

CHAPTER IV
IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION
OF THE PROJECT

Inspiration for the Project

Two doctoral-level classes provided inspiration for this project. One was a homiletics course during which I was exposed for the first time, in a systematic way, to recent scholarly developments in the field of narrative preaching. It was during this time that I began my first serious readings in the field.

The inspiration for linking time, narrative, and proclamation came in the other formative course which sought to lay a theological foundation for the practice of ministry. The instructor, Fernando Canale, of Andrews University, tutored the class in fundamental theology (the subject of his Th.D. dissertation) as a foundation for the other branches of theology. In fundamental theology, issues of theological system and first principles are determined in order to set the compass for what follows in the rest of the theological enterprise.¹

¹Fiorenza recognizes that fundamental theology has “developed into a distinct and independent theological discipline prior to systematic theology. . . . The independence . . . however, is not simply an issue of the division of labor. . . . A field of study is the subject matter of the area of study; fields of argument refer to the logical status of those propositions constituting the data and the arguments within a field. . . . Fundamental theology differs from systematic theology, not just as a field of study but as

Canale's "biblical system"¹ for doing theology rightly positions *time* as the ontological first principle (as opposed to Hellenistic notions of timelessness), *reason* as the epistemological principle (as opposed to all non-rational approaches), and *sanctuary* as a metaphysical framework by which the other principles are articulated in Scripture.² Even though it is well beyond the scope of this study to pursue these concepts in any depth, it is helpful to briefly see them as formative of the ideas which are expressed throughout this dissertation.

In Canale's view, the biblical notion of *sanctuary*, a ubiquitous presence and motif in Scripture, underscores the ultimate reality: That God has chosen to "dwell among" (Exod 25:8) his people, here and now, in their space-time continuum.³ Thus the central message of the Bible is not that God is transcendent. That the transcendent God is immanently involved in the time stream of His created beings is the startling reality of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures.

This is the true meaning of *sanctuary*: God is here with us (Exod 25:8) and for us (Rom 8:31) and has promised never to leave or forsake us (Heb 13:5). Because of this, we may "approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may

a field of argument. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1984), 268-9.

¹In contrast to the classical and several reformation systems, based on Hellenistic notions of timelessness.

²Fernando Canale, class syllabus for THST 705 Theology and Practice of Ministry, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, 1993.

³Ibid.

receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (4:16) This is the good news of the gospel! This is what the Bible has been trying to tell us all along.

It follows, therefore, that if ultimate reality has to do with the existence of a gracious God, fully engaged in the temporal realm, seeking a healing, integrative relationship with estranged members of the human family, preaching is the task of telling the Story of God’s presence with us and His saving work on our behalf, in the midst of our temporal world. It is incarnational work—the task of revealing something of Ultimacy within the confines of our own temporal world.

As noted previously, narrative preaching parallels God’s disclosure of Himself in relational terms through the biblical story in time and space. Narrative is intrinsically temporal in nature. It is inherently tuned to the cognitive and affective learning and communication processes of the human family.¹ In the words of Claudia Brodsky, “narrative is the literary form most generally understood to foster its own logical understanding.”² In short, it is a method most likely to connect with contemporary listeners and address the world of their concerns with glimpses of transcendence.

Canale’s fundamental theology found a ready partner in my growing interest in the power of narrative homiletics to convey something of ultimate reality in very temporal, and thus culturally appropriate, language. The marriage of time as

¹Lewis and Lewis, *Learning to Preach*, 51.

²Claudia J. Brodsky, *The Imposition of Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 3.

ontological reality and a homiletic form indelibly marked by time bore fruit in the conception of a project that would further this preacher's continuing spiritual and professional development through greater attention to both theory and practice.

Implementation of the Project

How the project was implemented, in moving toward the creation, presentation, and evaluation of a series of experimental narrative sermons, will now be described.

A Review of Relevant Literature and Development of the Model

The project itself began with selected readings and data gathering in the subject areas of time, narrative theory and method, historical theology, the Bible as literature, homiletics, hermeneutics, comparative narrative homiletics, and fundamental and practical theology. It continued with a careful evaluative survey of key narrative preaching models as proposed by leading homiletical scholars and practitioners.

Research for this project was conducted periodically, over the course of several years, in the libraries of Andrews University, Gonzaga University, Montana State University, Southern Adventist University, The University of Montana, Walla Walla College, and Whitman College. From this research came the elements of the integrative model set forth in this dissertation and the outline of narrative preaching characteristics presented in chapter 4.

Recruitment of a Team

With a view to developing a series of narrative sermons that would follow the model and be presented and evaluated in the context of my ministry in the Walla Walla College Church, the next task was to select a team of sermon evaluators that would reflect the diversity within our congregation in a variety of dimensions—age, gender, ethnicity, academic discipline, vocation, and individual interest. Also important to the team were individuals who possessed particular skills that would prove useful in the development and evaluation processes. The team ultimately chosen, though diverse, was intentionally tilted in the direction of the academic community which our collegiate church primarily serves, with probably more students and professors than an evaluation team in a more generalized setting might ordinarily have.

The official name given to the team was “Resource Group” because they would serve as more than evaluators. They assisted in the development of the evaluation instrument and in the selection of a series theme and topics for sermons in the series. I invited members to share any resources they might wish along the way in any of the areas of inquiry involved in this project as well as on the topics of the individual sermons. Some members did share helpful resources along the way.

A brief description of each of the Resource Group members follows (ages are approximated at the beginning of the sermon series): (1) Female, age 36, Caucasian, married, one young child, Ph.D. in History, college teacher; (2) Male, age 20, Caucasian, single, no children, English undergraduate, student; (3) Female, age 22, African American, single, no children, engineering undergraduate; student; (4) Male, age 48, Caucasian, married, two teens living at home, M.D., physician; (5) Female, age 19,

Caucasian, single, no children, Computer Science undergraduate, student; (6) Male, age 60, Caucasian, married, one adult child not living at home, Ph.D. in Speech Communication, college teacher; (7) Female, age 45, Caucasian, married, one toddler, one adolescent living at home, B.A., humanities, homemaker; (8) Male, age 20, Asian, single, no children, biology undergraduate; (9) Male, age 51, Caucasian, married, two adult children, one living at home, Ph.D. in Theology, college administrator; and (10) Male, age 36, Caucasian, married, two adolescents living at home, M.A. in Rhetoric, real estate developer.

Each Resource Group member agreed to commit a minimum of nine hours to their role in this project, in addition to the time they would spend listening to the sermons. These hours included an initial, one-hour start-up session, six one-hour periods for reflection and completion of the evaluation instrument, a one-hour, mid-term, face-to-face conversation with the preacher, and a concluding, one-hour wrap-up and celebration session upon completion of the project. The major incentive for this commitment may have been the opportunity to tell the preacher just exactly what they thought of the sermons. Each of the Resource Group members recruited responded in the affirmative to my invitation.

In return for their time, energy, and candor, I covenanted with the Resource Group members to (1) listen carefully and prayerfully to their observations with a view to growth in the discipline, (2) jealously guard their time commitment and not ask for additional installments, and (3) share some really great punch and cookies with the group to celebrate the project's completion, when it was all said and done.

Calling the Team Together

In order to get started, I called the team together for an initial meeting and outlined the tasks to which we had committed ourselves.

The agenda for the start-up session contained a number of important tasks which we would need to complete before going further: (1) acquaint the members of the group with the concept of narrative preaching and the elements of my personal, integrative narrative preaching model, (2) define the terms we would use in describing sermons in a narrative mode, (3) announce the date and time of the first sermon in the series, (4) look at several examples of sermon evaluation forms gleaned from pastors, homiletics teachers, and students as a means of deciding on the form we would use to evaluate this series of narrative sermons, (5) decide on a thematic direction and make recommendations for specific topics or preaching passages for the series, and (6) decide on procedures to be followed in distributing evaluation forms and recordings of sermons and collecting these items when the evaluations were completed. The session was productive and met the objectives implicit in the agenda.

The document, "What Is Narrative Preaching?" (see Appendix A), which I developed for the purpose of orienting the group to the world of narrative preaching was presented at the initial meeting of the group and members were given an opportunity to ask questions and make observations. It incorporates the integrative approach to narrative preaching described in the model presented in chapter 3 and became the basis for implementing the project. As previously noted, the integrative approach seeks to incorporate elements of several different narrative homiletic models that emerged in the initial reading and research stage of this project. The integrative model became part of

the group's conceptual framework, guiding it in shaping the assessment instrument the members would ultimately use to evaluate the individual sermons.

During the initial session of the Resource Group, I presented materials relating to a "grace orientation" (see Appendix B) which I had in mind for a theme for the sermon series. The Resource Group affirmed my suggestion for a series theme. It was agreed that the series would highlight biblical stories and illustrations of God's grace. The immediate impetus for this theme came from a work published in 1992, several years before this project began, wherein my denomination presented the first of its book-length reports on the results of its *Valuegenesis* survey of its high-school-age youth.¹ Two of the *Valuegenesis* researchers, Roger Dudley and Bailey Gillespie, described in the report a needed grace orientation and delineated important characteristics of mature faith.² Among the most alarming discoveries of the survey was that many youth in the church exhibited confusion about issues as fundamental as salvation by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ.³ In light of this current research,

¹See Roger L. Dudley, *Faith in the Balance*, with a foreword and marginal notations by V. Bailey Gillespie (Riverside, CA: La Sierra University Press, 1992). This was the first of what would grow to be a series of book-length reports on the results of the single largest study of its youth ever conducted by a religious denomination. Search Institute, a leader in the field of congregational studies, was commissioned to develop the *Valuegenesis* instrument and administer the surveys as part of the denomination's "Project Affirmation" program of assessment in three areas crucial to the development of its teens: churches, homes, and church-affiliated secondary schools.

²See Appendix B for copies of the overhead transparencies I presented at the Resource Group's initial session that led to the selection of Stories of Grace as our series theme. The concepts, and in many cases, the wording of these pages, were taken from Dudley, *Faith in the Balance*.

³Dudley and Gillespie reported that "the young people were nearly unanimous in affirming their belief that God's love is unconditional. They believed that

the theme of “grace orientation” for the narrative sermon series was seen as timely and of critical importance by the Resource Group. The group also recommended that I deal specifically with ideas of accountability to others, human suffering, and human failure and recovery under the general theme of “A Grace Orientation.”

With a half-dozen sample sermon evaluation forms in front of them— instruments which had been used by a number of teachers on the Walla Walla College campus, as well as elsewhere—the members of the Resource Group worked in this initial session toward the development of our own evaluative tool. They surveyed the examples provided, remarked about the features they liked and disliked on each, and discussed what was missing from all of them that would be necessary in evaluating the narrative sermons for this series, as we had defined them. I recorded their questions and observations in the form of handwritten notes.

From the notes of the initial session’s discussion about an evaluation form a new instrument was developed that would be the basis for examining sermons in the series from a number of angles (see Appendix C). While the delivery qualities of each sermon were not the primary focus of the project, I took the liberty, for purposes of my own continuing development as a preacher, to add a section (item #4 of the instrument) to the evaluation form which would inquire about these factors in ways not directly

nothing they could do would change God’s gracious intentions toward them. But when it comes to following through to the logical outcome of that belief—that their salvation is totally in God’s hands—most could not make the steps. Twice as many felt that they must contribute something to the redemption process as felt that God would provide everything needed. Adventist schooling makes only minor differences in understanding.” Dudley, 100.

specific to the narrative homiletic task. These data are not compiled and presented in this report even though a compelling case could, no doubt, be made that one cannot ultimately divorce issues of voice, diction, poise, gestures, and so forth in the delivery process from the overall experience of narrative communication on the part of the listener. Such matters were merely outside the range of inquiry for this particular exercise and its evaluation component. Nevertheless, the information compiled from item #4 on the evaluation form helped me in my growth as a preacher.

Although the data completed from the evaluation instruments are presented as averages of the total responses to each item (see compiled data on the pages following each of the six sermon manuscripts in Appendix D), it is understood that this instrument yields qualitative perspectives only. No attempt has been made to infer more than the individual instruments suggest or more than the mean of any item's responses express.

The Evaluation Instrument

The instrument developed by the Resource Group and used to evaluate the sermons in this project focused on six areas of inquiry.

Overall Impressions

Before attempts were made to dissect the sermon into individual parts, it was important to know about the overall, general impression the sermon made on the

listener. The instrument asked respondents to quantify, on a scale of 1 to 4¹ their overall impressions about the sermon's *Attention Qualities* (Was the sermon interesting?), its *Cognitive Qualities* (Was it informative?), its *Affective Qualities* (Was it a "moving" experience for the listener?), its *Persuasive Qualities* (Was it compelling?), and its *Relational Qualities* (Was it relevant to the listener?). Two open-ended items followed the above rankings as a means of further assessing overall impressions: "What were the sermon's greatest strengths?" and "What were the sermon's greatest weaknesses?"

Dealing with Scriptural Material

It was important to me and to those in the Resource Group that sermons in the project series deal with biblical material thoughtfully and responsibly. Thus respondents were asked to rank their evaluations of each sermon's handling of the biblical text on the 1 to 4 scale. The following questions were asked: (1) Was the sermon faithful to the textual material? (2) Did it emphasize the central theme of the text? (3) Was it characteristic of a grace orientation? and, (4) Was it a balanced presentation? These rankings were also followed by two open-ended questions: "What points, if any, made the sermon memorable?" and "What points, if any, made the sermon vital?" In asking the "memorable" question, I was actually seeking to discover if the sermon's narrative qualities would capture the imagination in ways I sensed they could, if handled

¹The choice of a scale of 1 to 4 was deliberately chosen so that the respondent could not give a "middle of the road" reaction, but would be required to tilt their response toward one end or the other of the scale. It was believed that this would ultimately foster greater candor and more useful evaluation results. Some evaluators occasionally ranked items in between the standard four numbers anyway.

in a thoughtful, skillful, and responsible manner. The final question sought to inquire if the sermon actually made a difference. In other words, was there something about the sermon that gave it “life-defining” and “life-renewing” qualities?

The Use of Narrative Forms

The items in the third section of the evaluation form the “narrative heart” of the evaluation instrument. In this section five narrative qualities are ranked in order to determine how well the sermon conforms to the narrative or story format and whether the form of the narrative approach is more plot or story focused. Higher scores on the first two rankings would generally indicate a dominant plot while higher scores on the last three would indicate that the story features were more to the forefront of the sermon. The final three rankings, focusing on the story side of the equation, are reminiscent of Steimle’s definition of narrative preaching as “a sensitive interweaving of stories: the preacher’s story, together with the lifestories of hearers with The Story in scripture, so that light is shed on each and by the power of the Holy Spirit, faith is evoked and nurtured.”¹

The question in the main heading of the third section of the evaluation form is: “How well did the sermon use the narrative or story format?” Again a scale of 1 to 4 was employed. The use of the narrative or story format was assessed in five areas: (1) “Movement and progression?” (2) “Plot easy to follow?” (3) “Linkage of Bible story and our stories?” (4) “Integration of preacher’s story?” and, (5) Connection to your life

¹Edmund A. Steimle, “Preaching as Story,” unpublished lecture, Princeton Theological Seminary, May 1976; quoted in McLellan, 14.

story?” These questions, as with the previous rankings, were followed with two open-ended questions: “What do you think the main idea in the sermon was?” and “What did the sermon mean to you personally?” The first question was intended to determine if the preacher was able to zero in on the most important thing and make it stick in the minds of the hearers and the second question was one of personal application to the listener’s life situation.

The Use of Time

The fifth item on the evaluation instrument consisted of a single inquiry into the practical use of time within the sermon structure. Respondents were asked to “Evaluate [the] organization of the sermon and [the] appropriateness of time usage for the story being told.” The purpose of this line of inquiry was to determine if the structure and time flow of the sermon were appropriate to the text and conducive to the method of its exposition.

The Experience of the Sermon

Since what one experiences in a sermon event may be the final test of its effectiveness, the sixth item inquired into the respondents’ personal experience as a result of listening to the sermon. A single, open-ended question was posed: “What did you experience as a result of listening to this sermon? (e.g.: faith, hope, love, God’s presence, conviction, guilt, forgiveness, grace, insight, motivation, etc?).”

How Can This Preacher and Sermon Be Improved?

The purpose of this project, from the outset, was professional

development. Thus the seventh and final question in the sermon evaluation got directly to the heart of professional development, by asking straightforwardly: “How can the preacher and the sermon improve?” The question was intentionally open-ended. I wanted to give the respondents the opportunity to be as clear and candid with me as possible, with a view to my own pastoral formation in the area of narrative preaching.

A Prayer Team

In addition to the Resource Group, I recruited another team of individuals who agreed to pray for me throughout the process of the sermon series and evaluation. Some members have continued to pray that this report of the project would be ultimately completed, as well. These individuals were chosen because of my perception that they were people of vigorous faith and because they had expressed an interest in my project.

Development of the Series of Narrative Sermons

With a working model for narrative preaching, an informed Resource Team, a cluster of prayer partners, a refined evaluation instrument, and a theme and suggested “topics” in hand, the project next turned to the phase of sermon development and presentation. As the project was conceived, a series of six narrative sermons was developed, employing the model described in chapter 3 and grounded in the philosophical concepts described briefly above.

For each sermon in the series (see Appendix D for manuscripts of the sermons and the results of the evaluations), once the peaching texts were selected, I did the exegetical work ordinarily associated with coming to understand the passage, with

special attention to the role of narrative hermeneutics and to the narrative homiletic matrix and then prepared an oral manuscript for delivery. On average, this process involved between twelve and eighteen hours per sermon.

Notifying the Resource Group

Prior to the presentation of each sermon in the series, each member of the Resource Group received a written notification of the sermon title, date, and venue, and an invitation to be there in person for this preaching event. A copy of the evaluation form we had jointly developed accompanied each notification and invitation.

Presenting the Narrative Sermons

A total of six sermons was developed and presented for this project. The preaching settings themselves, all within the collegiate church, ranged from an evening vesper service (some six hundred individuals, primarily students, attending), to a college chapel service (with nearly the entire campus family present, approximately 1300 people), to our regular, weekly worship service which tends to fill our 2,400-seat sanctuary to near capacity.

A Description of the Sermons

The first sermon in the series (see Appendix D for manuscripts of all sermons and results of each evaluation) focused on God's grace through the familiar story of the "prodigal son." In this sermon I attempted to parallel the story with a more contemporary story of my own "prodigality" and that of my friend, Tom. The real focus, however, was on the Father in the story. Ironically, He becomes the real "prodigal," in

the sense of spending grace more lavishly than the wayward son spent his money and vital energy. The imagery of running captivated me in this story and I employed a device I would use several times in this series—a reprise of the beginning story, recast at the end with similar imagery but containing an ironic twist. In the opening scene we see, hear and feel the young man running away from home. In the closing scene we see, hear and feel the “old man” running as swiftly as His legs will carry him toward his returning son so as to bestow upon him, with “prodigal” abandon, His forgiving love and healing grace.

In the second sermon, “Crossroads of Compassion,” I attempted to deal with our responsibility to others through Christ’s encounter with blind Bartimaeus. The setting, at the crossroads outside Jericho, formed an image which I employed metaphorically to suggest that we all come to crossroads in our lives where we must choose how we will respond to people in need. How we respond at such junctures is of critical importance. I used several contemporary “crossroads” stories to underscore and parallel the main story, concluding with the image of Christ choosing our life over His own at the most critical crossroad of all.

The third sermon, “A Touching Story,” focused on the vivid and scandalous imagery of a woman touching Jesus in an act of worship misunderstood by almost everyone present and Christ in turn “touching” her life and our lives with healing, transforming grace. The sermon consisted of the blending (perhaps juxtaposing) of several biblical scenes with several contemporary stories to form a collage of grace.

The second half of the six-part sermon series commenced with a sermon entitled “What a Splendid Disappointment.” Here I attempted to deal with human failure

and disappointment and the ability of grace to override and reclaim Jacob, me, and others who acknowledge, in the midst of their distress, that only by God's blessing and by an act of His grace can their lives find the deepest meaning and fulfillment. The brook Jabbok, beside which Jacob camped alone on the night he wrestled with a strange and powerful being, became a focal point for my own story and the stories of the congregation. The suggestion was that we have all been, are presently there, or soon will arrive at our own personal "Jabboks." The message was how to survive and turn disappointment into something splendid through the discovery of grace in just such "bottoming-out" experiences. At Jabbok Jacob clung to God, even as God had His arms around Jacob.

"At the End of the Road to Nowhere," sermon number five, was an Easter message that focused on Christ turning the despair and escapism of two dejected disciples into joy and new life through a timely revelation of Himself and His plan for their lives. The image of a journey down a lonely, dusty road outside Jerusalem (the road to Emmaus) was used as a vehicle for exploring our own journeys in search of an escape from "scenes" we'd rather not deal with. The grace in the story is in Christ's "catching up" with the two near the end of their escape and turning them around in a marvelous and symbolic gesture of grace. For this sermon I employed not only the imagery of the road, but also experimented with imaginary dialogue between the two central characters in order to underscore the extent of their despair and, later, the extent of their joy when the road to Emmaus had become merely a distant memory.

The final sermon in the series, "Only the Heart Can Truly See," started with a contemporary story. The others had begun with the biblical story in view first.

Several evaluators expressed appreciation for this approach, noting that it carried a greater sense of surprise and suspense than when I began immediately with a familiar scriptural narrative. The message centered around grace through the “eyes” of one who at first could not see. The images of the perceptive “blind” people and unseeing “sighted” people were cast in graphic relief. In the final analysis it is the heart alone that can truly perceive and embrace the radical, transforming, healing grace of God in Jesus Christ. This sermon used imagined scenes and interactions of the blind man to enhance interest and meaning.

When the series concluded there was a great sense that it should all be reconceived, rewritten, and commenced all over again. There was also a sense of satisfaction in what had been accomplished. It was evident that I had much more to learn about this model, the overall method, and the challenges and opportunities inherent within the practice of the performative discipline of narrative preaching.

The Mid-Term Interviews

At the mid-term point in the series, after the presentation of the third sermon, I met with the evaluators individually to allow them time to ask me questions and to share observations that were not necessarily covered in the written evaluation forms they submitted following each installment in the series. These sessions aided my continuing development in the discipline of narrative preaching.

As might be expected from the makeup of the team, members who had particular interest and expertise in the development of rhetorical skills took this opportunity to share, among other things, helpful insights into how the narrative sermons

could be better delivered. One team member wished for a bit more of a “road map” or “forecast” in my sermons, reflecting a comfort level in styles of preaching that are more deductive in their approach.

An observant member counseled me “not to get lost in the forest due to the trees” or, in other words, don’t get so into the story that I forget why I’m telling it in the first place. Another evaluator made a similar point: “When you are telling a story, make the point clear. Don’t make me guess why you’re creating these pictures and telling this tale.”

Some of the Team Members thought my use of an oral manuscript (the sermons were not entirely committed to memory in the delivery process) was appropriate and skillfully done. Others wished for more freedom from the manuscript, noting that the more I got away from the manuscript the better the communication qualities and overall experience became for them.

Members took time, with care and candor, to both affirm my initial efforts and my calling to preach, and to give me important direction for continuing development as a narrative preacher. One of the most obvious conclusions from the interviews was that this is not a medium easily mastered. The Resource Group members offered helpful suggestions which I attempted to implement in the last half of the sermon series.

Recording Sermons and Distributing Forms

A video and audio recording of each sermon presentation was made, duplicated, and distributed to members of the Resource Group during the week following the sermon, along with a “clean” copy of the evaluation instrument. That way those who

wished to review any portions of the sermon in their evaluation processes could do so and any who had not been able to attend personally could still listen and provide a written evaluation.

Preserving Anonymity

Inasmuch as candor on the part of the evaluators was crucial to the learning curve, precautions were taken to give every opportunity for anonymity in responses. The evaluation form, for example, did not ask for the group member's name. Some members chose to disclose their identities on the form anyway. Other evaluators typed their comments so as not to tempt the preacher to lapse into the historical-critical mode of documentary analysis in order to determine a form's true authorship.

Identical return envelopes were distributed with each copy of the evaluation form, and my office manager was alerted to look for completed forms in the incoming mail and to separate them from any identifying elements before they reached my desk. In general, I believe these anonymity measures worked to the degree that evaluators wished for their comments to be assimilated without reference to personality.

Assimilating the Data

When the evaluations for each sermon were completed, I read them carefully, seeking to apply their insights in the next installment in the series. A student secretary helped compile and enter the results into a computer. The data from the evaluation forms are presented in Appendix D along with manuscripts of the six narrative sermons.

Assessing the Impact of the Series

From both the formal written and conversational evaluation processes I discerned that narrative approaches indeed held potential for connecting with hearers in ways I had envisioned. I had seen modest success in employing the rudiments of the form. There was also a clear sense that mastery of the methodology would be a lifelong pursuit and that my narrative life had just begun.

One of my personal observations is that the process of being evaluated, even though most helpful to me, also had a certain inhibiting effect on my preaching. Several evaluators noticed that this “laboratory” situation in which I presented the sermons caused me to be more wooden in my delivery and stilted in my gestures. These factors, of course, work against the overall direction of narrative preaching and were things I would need to work on in order to overcome. I sensed it was true that, even though I had learned a number of things about the method and begun to employ elements of narrative preaching, I was not as completely “home” in the narrative world as I would like to have been.

The experience of my first structured experimentation in narrative preaching is analogous to learning to dance while one is still consciously counting the steps. I have concluded that genuine proficiency in narrative preaching will take significant additional work and practice. Happily, it is a work and practice that has already begun and a work and practice I am eager to continue.

Looking to the Future

Based upon the study and praxis elements inherent within this project, it is my intention to continue to develop my understanding and implementation of the principles brought to light in this dissertation. An outline of my formal summary, conclusions, and recommendations for ongoing ministry and development follows in chapter 5.

CHAPTER V
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND
RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This project assembled resources from a variety of disciplines and brought them to bear on the development of an integrative model for narrative preaching and the implementation of the model in a series of narrative sermons presented in the context of an active, collegiate ministry. The sermons were subject to a formative evaluation process with a view to the evaluatee's professional development in narrative preaching. After researching narrative preaching theory and practice, examining some of the best available models, and experimenting with an integrative model through the development, presentation and evaluation of six narrative sermons, I have come to recognize twelve principles that hold true for narrative preaching and for preachers and projects that work in this particular field.

Twelve Principles

The following twelve principles have been affirmed in both the research and implementation stages of this project.

1. God has revealed Himself and His plan to meet the deepest needs and longings of human beings through His Word, the Bible.

2. The manner of God's revelation in Scripture is primarily narrative.
3. Humans are temporal creatures and experience life in narrative or narrative-like modes of consciousness. They are inherently story generators and story consumers and are drawn to narrative communication.
4. The Story of God's gracious redemptive initiative in Jesus Christ constitutes the "center" of the Story and the "good news" of the gospel.
5. In order for humans to respond in faith to the gospel, someone must tell them the Story.
6. It is easiest for humans to hear and assimilate the Story when it is couched in a language humans already intuitively understand—that of story.
7. Some individuals are particularly called to proclaim the Story as full-time ministers of the gospel.
8. Their work is not dependent on human wisdom and human narration skills alone; it is ultimately rendered effective through the power of the Holy Spirit whose main mission is to aid in the telling of the Story of God's work of redemption in Jesus Christ.
9. Even though narrative encompasses behaviors that are innate to human beings, humans can also develop their capacity to communicate more effectively in the narrative mode.
10. A structured discipline of reading and reflection, analysis and synthesis, and practice and evaluation is a good way to enhance one's skills in narrative communication.

11. An integrative approach, synthesizing the best of what is known about narrative preaching into a comprehensive model for deployment, is a useful approach to the task of narrative homiletics.

12. Ordinary Christians, who care about one's journey in the direction of personal and professional development, make excellent guides, evaluators, and traveling companions on the journey. They are an immeasurable blessing!

Conclusions

The Joy of Discovery

The discovery stage of this project, involving reading and research in a number of diverse areas of specialization, is an ongoing process. A certain amount of this is reading and reflection that I would likely not have otherwise done, had it not been for the motivation inherent within the Doctor of Ministry project. I am grateful for the discipline and the benefits it has accrued.

A Continuing Learning Curve

Narrative is a mode of communication that is, at once, both "natural" and complex. The model for preaching, presented in chapter 3, continues to develop in my thinking. It has demonstrated itself, however, during this brief "test drive," to be a valid way of thinking about texts and the proclamation of texts in narrative ways. The evaluation data bear that out. Rather than being the last word on this topic, however, I hope that the model will be the beginning of a dialogue with others interested in narrative preaching and that the general design and its application will continue to grow in clarity and usefulness. The model provides enough room to experiment in a variety of ways

with text and sermonic intentions. I was able to work in all four quadrants of the model and to seek to integrate more than one of the classic approaches in each of my presentations.

A Revival of Primitive Enthusiasm

Rather than being exhausted by this process (it has indeed consumed a significant amount of my time and energy), I have been energized by it and motivated to continuing development in an area to which I intend to devote considerable attention in the future.

A Modest Success

This project, although limited in its scope, was modestly successful in what it did attempt. It produced a personal, working model for narrative preaching and tested the model in the “real-life” setting of six preaching events.

The model itself was affirmed by the way it “worked.” It provided, for example, a framework for crafting narrative sermons that resulted in six useful manuscripts and six reasonably “successful” presentations. The model was deemed successful also in the sense that the evaluators were able to understand it (a key component in any workable theory or model is understandability), know when it was being implemented and why, and evaluate the results of my experimentation within the model by reference to the model.

The model proposed to work toward an integration of previous approaches. It proved to be a success in this dimension also. Each of the six sermons, in one way or another, operated in the arena of synthesis, employing the best of several

different approaches rather than simply cloning and imitating just one of the models previously surveyed.

The model attempted to underscore that narrative preaching is something that can be practiced by “beginners” with certain positive effects. That I am such a novice in the craft is evident in some of the evaluative comments and also self evident in my own subjective analysis. That positive outcomes can be achieved through even modest efforts was also underscored by the evaluation data.

There is much work that remains to be done in continuing refinement and testing of the model. Some of these remaining tasks are alluded to in the section of this chapter below that deals with recommendations for further study.

Finding a Home in Narrative

Narrative, while a “natural” mode of communication for the innately narrative human family, was not, at an early stage in my pastoral formation, a “natural” mode of sermon “construction” for me. For one who once considered narrative forms lower on the homiletic “food chain” than conceptual methodologies, this project has been further formative for me in confirming my growing sense of comfort and residency in the realm of narrative homiletics. It has contributed to this preacher’s theoretical understanding of the discipline and somewhat to his proficiency in the practice of the craft. Moreover it has helped shape his sense of direction for future homiletic endeavors as he continues to find and develop his narrative “voice.”

Admittedly, this has not always been an easy or affirming process for me, for my evaluators, or for my congregation. Early on in the implementation stage of the

project, several of my closest friends in the Resource Group confided in candor that “they liked it better when I was a discursive preacher.” Theirs was a realistic assessment of my less than stellar attempts to employ a new design and communicate in “new” forms. My attempts at narrative have been humble (and frequently humbling) and represent a structured approach to beginnings in the field rather than, by any means, mastery of the craft.

Inhabiting Other Worlds

Not in any way to negate the thesis of this study that humans instinctively experience life in narrative ways or in ways that are temporally similar to narrative, it must also be acknowledged that not all humans feel naturally at home in the narrative world. Narrative is not the only way to reach people, even though it may be a preferred mode in many cases. In the case of some individuals and even, possibly, some congregations, the narrative approach may simply not “work” as well as other approaches or as well as some blending of approaches. One suspects that a complex matrix of factors, including genetic, social, educational, temperamental, and so forth, combine to cause some individuals to prefer discursive styles of preaching over narrative, although it is certainly beyond the scope of this study to postulate exactly what those factors are or how they form our preferences for particular modes of communication.

For some individuals, it is possible that, after generations of conceptual preaching, narrative styles may sound so different as to call into question whether sermons in this mode are genuinely “biblical.” As old as the narrative mode truly is, some parishioners may simply dismiss preaching in this realm as “newfangled” and thus

not trustworthy. It may thus be that congregations will need to be gently “educated” in what constitutes genuine biblical communication. What, on the surface of a narrative sermon, may not sound sufficiently “biblical”—because of its simplicity, because it lacks that familiar didactic tone, because there is not that “top-down” condescension of certain deductive methods, or because it may not convey enough of that “comfortable discomfort” of guilt¹—may need to be carefully reexamined in light of the narrative qualities of the Bible itself and its own preferred mode of communication. What some may associate with biblical preaching may have far more to do with their long enculturation in a particular preaching style than any particularly keen sense of spiritual discernment.

In short, then, it is recognized that narrative is not a cure-all for every “suffering” pulpit and pew. Moreover, those preachers who do choose to move in the narrative direction may not immediately find receptive congregants who are eager to hear the Word of the Lord in a narrative mode, if for no other reason than simply because parishioners themselves may have become quite comfortable with more familiar pulpit styles and modes of homiletic communication.

¹It is the observation of this preacher that some parishioners do not believe a sermon is biblical unless they go home feeling at least a little “beat up” and guilty. Indulging in this dangerous notion can lead one to adopt a substitute atonement wherein “suffering” sufficiently for one’s own sins—via guilt, shame, misfortune, despair, and the endurance of so-called biblical preaching—obviates the need to lay their spiritual burdens at the feet of the Cross of Jesus Christ. Such is the spiritual dysfunction operative in some who call themselves Christians and of such is a particularly toxic faith system constructed and perpetuated.

A Means of Spiritual Formation

The project has also contributed positively to my own continuing spiritual formation. There have been moments of both insight and epiphany, as well as more challenging times of frustration and near despair, in attempting to grasp with my finite, temporal faculties, what ultimately transcends temporality itself.

Finally, this project has served to reignite my passion for God and for the proclamation of His sublime and matchless Story of love and grace. Ironically, this is a passion easily diminished in the rush to accomplish the very services ministers are privileged to perform in the name of Christ. It is a passion that can only be recaptured in quieter, more reflective moments of spiritual discipline when, “all over again,” the servant “leans in” and waits for the quiet voice of the Master who created all of time and space and has chosen to dwell in receptive human minds and hearts. In times of devotion and study, this project has provided some of those “leaning in” moments when, in His providence and infinite Grace, God has drawn near to me in all of my finitude, temporality and sinfulness. I am in awe of, and anew in love with, the One “who first loved” me (1 John 4:19).

Recommendations for Further Study

The value of this and any useful study may lie as much in the questions it generates as in those it ultimately answers. This particular exercise has sought to address several specific issues related to narrative preaching and how to develop professionally as a narrative preacher. Questions generated in the process point out areas for continuing

study in this and related fields. An outline of recommendations for further study and application follows.

The Usefulness of the Model for the Task of Hermeneutics

The integrative model presented in this study provides one way to understand and “plot” the narrative intention of texts with reference to four distinct approaches to narrative understanding and practice. As indicated earlier in this study, some theorists have spoken of narrative as a key to all hermeneutic endeavor. To what degree the seeds of a paradigm for interpretation may be contained in the integrative model presented in this project has yet to be examined in a comprehensive way. Thus work in the area of hermeneutics from the perspective of an integrative approach, such as the one presented in this project’s integrative model, may render positive results for interpretation.

The Situational Viability of Narrative Preaching

This study, while making a strong case for the general viability of narrative as a homiletic mode, recognizes that narrative is not always the “right” approach for particular individuals and situations. In so doing, however, its boundaries were sufficiently limited as to not allow for an exploration of the question of when a narrative approach is the “best” way and when it is not. Thus a further exploration in the area of homiletic strategy and of determining the situational factors that may make narrative an optimal mode of homiletic communication warrants further attention.

A Program of Congregational Education in Narrative

Congregations may not immediately or naturally adapt to abrupt changes in homiletic mode and praxis, even ones, such as narrative, that have a certain “built-in” correlation with human consciousness and may ultimately prove helpful. Thus a comprehensive program for educating congregations in the literary qualities of the Bible, the narrative nature of biblical revelation, and in preaching styles that are narrative in their approach may be useful as part of an overall strategy for implementing a narrative model of preaching in the local church. The development of such a program constitutes a fruitful area for continuing study.

The Narrative Receptivity of Individuals

While humans are generally drawn intuitively to narrative communication, this is true in varying degrees from individual to individual. Some persons, perhaps because of academic training or inherent traits, adapt well to or are primarily inclined to discursive, conceptual preaching. Reasons for these variables in the receptivity to narrative in individual congregants constitute an area for further research and study.

Narrative Receptivity and Developmental Studies

A subset of the above recommended area for additional inquiry is the question of correlations between levels of narrative receptivity and individual development as measured against recognized standards of human development such as those presented by Jean Piaget, Eric Erickson, Lawrence Kohlberg, and, more recently,

the work of James Fowler in the area of faith development.¹ Fowler, for example, alludes to the role of story in his schemata of faith development. In the early levels of Fowler's six stages (seven stages, if one counts his "0" or "Undifferentiated" stage) story is prominent but then diminishes in importance in his "Individuative-Reflective" stage (Stage 4). Stories and symbols return with surprising spiritual energy in the "Conjunctive" stage (Stage 5) of faith development. How all of this might correlate to levels of receptivity for narrative preaching might be an interesting and fruitful area of study and might provide at least one clue in the previously mentioned area for continuing inquiry.

Narrative and Personal Spiritual Formation

The impact of narrative in the experience of individuals in corporate settings wherein the Word of God is proclaimed in a narrative mode has been a focus of this project. Of equal importance and interest is the role narrative can play in the individual Christian's personal devotions and individual spiritual formation. Given the narrative quality of Scripture and the apparent narrative "hard wiring" of human beings, the role of narrative forms for the enhancement of the personal spiritual disciplines should be explored further in a systematic way.

¹See James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1981). For a life-cycle based approach to this same area of inquiry, see V. Bailey Gillespie, *The Experience of Faith* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1988).

Narrative Preaching and the Evangelistic Mission of the Church

As mentioned earlier in this study, the Christian church was “built” on the basis of narrative preaching, i.e., the telling of the Story of Jesus by those who were eyewitnesses to the incarnation of Christ and the events of Jesus’ life, teaching, death, and resurrection. It would be well to consider what role narrative might play in a productive strategy for evangelism today as contemporary Christians seek to fulfill Christ’s commission to “go and tell” the Story. Some cultures appear to be particularly receptive to narrative forms of communication. As alluded to in this study, post-modern culture in Western societies is responsive to story modes, perhaps in ways that they are not responsive to more traditional forms. Much of evangelistic preaching today is in the discursive, conceptual mode, seeking to invite the listener to “agree” with certain doctrinal propositions. An exciting area of inquiry will be found in adapting narrative forms to the practical task of evangelistic preaching for conversional growth in the church through its public evangelistic endeavors.

A Series of Doctrinal Sermons in the Narrative Mode

As is the case with evangelistic preaching, so much of “doctrinal” preaching today is done in the discursive, conceptual mode. Yet this is not generally the way the Scriptures convey the “data” upon which we build our doctrinal constructs. The development of a series of doctrinal sermons utilizing the Bible’s own primary mode of communication could be a challenging and rewarding endeavor. This is an area for further study and work.

A Study of Time, Sanctuary, and Narrativity

The concepts that initially inspired this project—the relationship between biblical issues of time, sanctuary, the nature of God, the nature of human experience, and narrativity—have only been touched on in this study with the briefest of mention. These concepts continue to intrigue me, even though I have only “scratched the surface.” They deserve further consideration.

Resources for a Narrative Approach to Congregational Formation

Just as narrative forms are useful in personal spiritual formation, so these forms can be helpful also in the pastoral task of forming a people in the image of Christ. A comprehensive system of resources for corporate worship experiences, smaller, cell-group experiences, and individual devotional experiences needs to be developed for pastors and congregations desiring to apply the narrative advantages to their corporate life in the body of Christ. This is an area recommended for further study.

A System for Collecting, Storing and Retrieving Narrative Resources

No preacher or student is better than his or her resources. A system for the collection of narrative resources and the storage of them in a systematic manner so as to facilitate ease in accessing them is something I have yet to develop, yet it is something that would be most useful. These materials do not seem to immediately fit the pastor’s standard filing schemata. To slip resources into existing files only perpetuates the idea that such materials are only illustrations for the “hard” resources already stored therein.

Which approach to take in systematizing is not yet apparent. Should materials be filed according to their themes, according to the model with which they are most closely aligned (story, imagery, inductive, plot), or according to their performative and phenomenological values? Answering these questions will constitute a fruitful area for creative work and call for a preparatory work of study and reflection.

Epilogue

This project has given me the opportunity to make a simple beginning in an area that continues to be of intense interest to me. My modest initial efforts and my less-than-perfect evaluation scores notwithstanding, I must confess (borrowing once again from Gadamer's imaginative metaphor): I love this "game."

What facility in the "method" I have achieved thus far has come mainly from hands-on "play" on the "field," implementing a "game plan" that is intentionally inclusive of several classical models for narrative preaching. I have been helped along the way by faithful "cheerleaders" and lay "coaches" who were kind enough to both encourage and critique me with a gracious spirit of candor. I am most grateful to these men and women who enthusiastically got into the "game" with me.

In the "field" of narrative preaching, as with most of the other "sports" I have attempted to "play," I have often exhibited greater zeal than knowledge. Nevertheless, it has been my privilege to observe that narrative sermons "connect" with listeners in unique, life-changing ways. Therefore, I intend to continue "playing" in this "arena" until the "whistle blows" (the biblically correct image is *trumpet*), perhaps even growing in my "skill level" along the way, until the "final score" is tallied and I am

invited on the basis of grace alone to join the immortal “legends of the game” who have gone before me and who have themselves “played hard and well.” Many in this great “arena” of witnesses also began the “game” with modest “abilities” and some made the ultimate sacrifice on the “field,” counting it a privilege to give their very lives for the sake of the “game” and its “Founder” and “MVP”:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Heb 12:1-3)

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

ORIENTATION GUIDE FOR RESOURCE GROUP

The following description was presented to the Resource Group at their initial meeting to orient them to the concept of narrative preaching.

WHAT IS NARRATIVE PREACHING?

By John C. Cress

Narrative preaching parallels God's disclosure of Himself in relational terms through the Biblical story in time and space. It is inherently relational and tuned to the cognitive and affective learning and communication processes of the majority of human beings.¹ Witness the power of the popular media which understand how best to engage the consumer. Even much of today's "hard news" is delivered most compellingly in narrative format. Narrative is the method most likely to connect with contemporary listeners.

If ultimate reality is relational and rooted in time, space and story, then preaching at its best is not merely didactic or discursive. It is narrative, it is relational, it is:

A sensitive interweaving of three stories: the preacher's story, together with the life stories of hearers with the Story in scripture, so that light is shed on each and by the power of the Holy Spirit, faith is evoked and nurtured.²

Narrative preaching may be presented in either the "Pure Story" or the "Shared Story" sermon. In "Pure Story" sermons the narrative is delivered with little additional reflection or interpretation. The "Shared Story" sermon, interweaves the biblical story with the congregation's stories through the medium of the preacher's story. Narrative preaching exhibits the following characteristics:³

¹Ralph L. Lewis and Gregg Lewis, Learning To Preach Like Jesus (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989), 51.

²Edmund A. Steimle, "Preaching as Story," unpublished lecture, Princeton Theological Seminary, May 1976; quoted in Bert Denton McLellan, Jr., "Shared Story: A Narrative Approach to Preaching" (D.Min. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1978), 14.

³For both this description of story preaching and the list of characteristics which follow, I am indebted to an excellent Doctor of Ministry project on narrative preaching completed at Princeton Theological Seminary. See McLellan, 107.

It Is Secular

Narrative preaching steers away from biblical and theological verbiage which may be meaningless to secularized hearers. It is a conscious effort to recast spiritual realities in common, everyday words, symbols and images.

It Is Dialogical

Narrative preaching carries on a dialogue between God's story and ours, noting how the two intersect.

It Is Concrete

Preaching, in certain sectors, is seen primarily as an abstract, didactic exercise. Narrative preaching seeks rather to inhabit the very real world of concrete realities where hearers live with a message of hope and grace.

It Is Inductive

Rather than abstracting one idea and then drawing conclusions or deductions from it to apply to our lives, narrative preaching seeks to reveal the particulars through the process of examining the whole in story form.

It Is Indicative More Than Imperative

It shows more than it tells. It provides the framework and invites the hearer to assemble the parts.

It Follows a Narrative Plot

Instead of being an outline of points and ideas, a story sermon will allow the ideas to emerge from the narrative. It will provide a problem or conflict, move to a climax through the narrative, and then bring about resolution of the conflict.

It Is Personal

The story sermon deals with persons and experiences with which hearers can identify. Christ's parables followed this pattern.

It Utilizes "Images" More Than "Ideas"

Narrative preaching is a "right brain" *and* "left brain" enterprise. It seeks to communicate wholistically.

It Leaves Conclusions up to the Hearers

The congregation must "finish" the sermon. This implies trust in the Holy Spirit to do His work of bringing forth fruit once the seeds are sown. There may well be a call to commitment, but no formulaic, ready-made response.

APPENDIX B

GRACE ORIENTATION MATERIALS

The following overhead projection transparency masters were presented to the Resource Group at their initial meeting to propose "Grace Orientation" as a theme for the project's series of narrative sermons.

The source for these perspectives is:

Dudley, Roger L. *Faith in the Balance*. With a foreword and marginal notes by V. Bailey Gillespie. Riverside, CA: La Sierra University Press, 1992.

*God's salvation
is always apart
from human contribution
and human manipulation.
Salvation by grace alone
through faith
suggests that God acts
on behalf of humankind.
Salvation comes
from God.*

*Individuals surveyed
showed difficulties in resolving
the tension between
“saved by grace”
and “judged by works.”
Their general tendency was to support
both law and grace
as means of salvation.
As they struggled to affirm
both streams of thought
imbibed from their Christian nurture,
they exhibited
split personalities
unable to harmonize
logical opposites.*

Young people are unanimous in affirming their belief that:

- *God's love is unconditional*
- *Nothing can change God's gracious intention toward them.*

BUT

They have trouble understanding what this means:

- *Only 29% agree that there is nothing they can do to earn salvation.*

**A useful statistic about
the following statement
regarding law orientation:**

*A person's standing
before God is based on
his/her obedience to
God's law.*

*Nearly two-thirds of a
national sample of adult
church members (65%)
agreed with this statement
and about half (51%)
strongly agreed.*

**What is a
“Grace Orientation?”**



“I’m speaking about a focus on the love,
promise and presence of Jesus Christ
that inspires youth to internalize
the values and lifestyles
associated with a
Christian
life.”

Our data on this are conclusive.

Youth of overly strict homes and schools tend to become moral rebels, rejecting the very values adults are trying to impose on them.

By way of contrast, adults who emphasize commitment to Christ, His love, His promise, His empowering presence and forgiveness will find a larger number of their youth

- accepting the faith of the church
- evidencing higher self-esteem
- showing a more caring spirit
- becoming involved in service
- being hopeful about the future, and
- excelling academically

MATURE FAITH

1. Trusts in God's saving grace and believes firmly in the humanity and divinity of Christ.
2. Experiences a sense of personal well being, security and peace.
3. Integrates faith and life, seeing work, family, social relationships and political choices as part of one's religious life.
4. Seeks personal growth through study, reflection, prayer and discussion with others.
5. Seeks to be part of a community of believers in which people give witness to their faith and support and nourish one another.
6. Holds life-affirming values, including a personal sense of responsibility for the welfare of others, affirmation of cultural and religious diversity, commitment to racial and gender equality and commitment to healthful living.
7. Advocates social and global change to bring about greater social justice.
8. Serves humanity consistently and passionately through acts of love and justice.

APPENDIX C

THE NARRATIVE SERMON EVALUATION INSTRUMENT

This instrument was developed in consultation with the Resource Group.

Narrative Sermon Evaluation Instrument

John C. Cress

Sermon Title _____ Date _____

Rank quantitative items as follows: 1 = poor/not very effective, 2 = fair/some-what effective, 3 = good/effectiveness a bit above average, 4 = excellent/very effective. Give short answers for qualitative items.

1. What was your overall impressions of the sermon?

A. Attention Qualities–Interesting?	1	2	3	4
B. Cognitive Qualities–Informative?	1	2	3	4
C. Affective Qualities–Moving?	1	2	3	4
D. Persuasive Qualities–Compelling?	1	2	3	4
E. Relational Qualities–Relevant?	1	2	3	4

What were the sermon's greatest strengths? _____

What were the sermon's greatest weaknesses? _____

2. How did the sermon deal with scripture?

A. Faithful to the textual material?	1	2	3	4
B. Emphasis on central theme of text?	1	2	3	4
C. A grace orientation?	1	2	3	4
D. A balanced presentation?	1	2	3	4

What points, if any, made the sermon memorable? _____

What points, if any, made the sermon vital? _____

3. How well did the sermon use the narrative or story format?

A. Movement and progression?	1	2	3	4
B. Plot easy to follow?	1	2	3	4
C. Linkage of Bible story and our stories?	1	2	3	4
D. Integration of preacher's story?	1	2	3	4
E. Connection to your life story?	1	2	3	4

What do you think the main idea in the sermon was? _____

What did the sermon mean to you personally? _____

4. Evaluate the preacher's communication and delivery skills.

A.	Vocabulary—rich, varied, interesting?	1	2	3	4
B.	Grammar, syntax—appropriate usage?	1	2	3	4
C.	Vocal quality—easy to listen to?	1	2	3	4
D.	Vocal dynamics—variation in pitch?	1	2	3	4
E.	Vocal level—well adapted to setting?	1	2	3	4
F.	Vocal rate—speed of delivery?	1	2	3	4
G.	Articulation—distinct, clear?	1	2	3	4
H.	Use of notes—sense of freedom?	1	2	3	4
I.	Energy level—appropriate to message?	1	2	3	4
J.	Eye contact with listeners—positive?	1	2	3	4
K.	Posture and poise—comfortable?	1	2	3	4
L.	Facial expressions—warm, natural?	1	2	3	4
M.	Use of gestures—appropriate, natural?	1	2	3	4
N.	Movement on platform—appropriate?	1	2	3	4
O.	Platform presence—engaging?	1	2	3	4
P.	Rapport with listeners—well connected?	1	2	3	4
Q.	Logical appeal—well reasoned?	1	2	3	4
R.	Ethical appeal—source credibility?	1	2	3	4
S.	Emotional appeal—appropriate passion?	1	2	3	4
T.	Overall appeal—faith enhancing?	1	2	3	4

What were the most effective communication qualities? _____

What were the least effective communication qualities? _____

5. Evaluate organization of the sermon and appropriateness of time usage for the story being told.

6. What did you experience as a result of listening to this sermon? (e.g.: faith, hope, love, God's presence, conviction, guilt, forgiveness, grace, insight, motivation, etc?)

7. How can the preacher and the sermon improve? _____

APPENDIX D
NARRATIVE SERMON MANUSCRIPTS
AND EVALUATIONS

The form of the following sermon manuscripts differs from the form of the original, oral manuscripts prepared for the actual preaching events. The single-spaced paragraph form in this appendix has been employed herein to reduce the number of pages in this dissertation.

Manuscript for Narrative Sermon 1 in the Series.
Based on Luke 15:11-32

Old Men Never Run

He hit the ground running. Off the front porch, down the lane, through the gate and on to freedom. Free at last! Free at last! Hallelujah! I'm free, I'm free at last!

You can't imagine how much anticipation has gone into this moment. Like an Olympic skier at the top of the course, he has envisioned this run a million times. And now his legs are pumping. His heart is pounding. The sound of his feet on the pavement beats out the cadence of his freedom. There is a rush of wind against his face. And this moment is sweet, incredibly sweet! It's one of those moments which is eternalize in his memory. He will never, ever forget.

He's breaking all the rules, you know. Young men never run. Especially not young rich men. Not young rich men who've got everything. Excellent clothes! Fine wheels! Lots of toys. Lots of cash. Intelligence. Good looks. Great personality. Women. Fine women. They love this guy. Hey, what's not to love? Young men never run. They saunter!

Can someone tell me what's wrong with this picture? Lots of people would kill to be in this guy's Reeboks. And here he is, terribly unhappy, wishing he were anywhere else but in his father's house. So we find him running, running down the road, away from the good life. Full speed ahead.

Some say he flipped out. Totally bonkers! Maybe it was his older brother who first used the "P" Word—"Prodigal"—to try and make some sense out of it all. Prodigal means wildly extravagant. Excessive. Spending like you own the whole universe . . . like there's no tomorrow. Profuse. Lavish. Wasteful. Giving away the bank! In most circles it's pretty much synonymous with stupid. Except in this case, it's also pretty much synonymous with fun. Nobody ever accused this chap of not grabbing more than his fair share of fun! You can just hear the older, upright, baffled brother, "He's gone too far this time, Dad, way overboard! He's gone prodigal on us. Absolutely prodigal!"

My buddy, Tom went prodigal. We were classmates at a Christian high school, and the truth is, we had it made. Ours was actually a progressive school. Largest in the denomination at that time. Nobody could figure out why the two of us found our school so confining, but we did. Tom hit the ground running. It was the summer of '69 and Tom left Florida heading for California. It seemed like everybody went to California in the summer of '69.

Tom was an amazingly gifted guitarist and singer. He came from a musical family. His dad was an Christian evangelist and gospel singer. The truly remarkable thing about Tom, however, was his song writing. Great stuff. Music and lyrics just flowed out of the guy like a fountain that wouldn't quit.

Tom and a trio of equally talented young rockers—all Christian workers' kids—set out to make their fortune in a market hungry for hot new talent. They were good, very good! They worked hard and began to gain notice in the Bay Area club scene. Tom and his band members also began to acquire the flamboyant, on-the-edge lifestyle that made rock musicians such popular antiheroes in those days. Booze, drugs, groupies—the whole nine yards. Riotous living—as Luke 15 calls it.

Tom would write to me periodically to let me know how things were going. He described starting his days with a joint and rehearsing twenty-four hours straight with the group, all pumped up on speed. You could probably get good at most anything if you never stopped to eat or sleep. The only thing that was missing was big money. It was mostly local gigs up to that point. Not the high paying stuff.

But that all changed one day. The producers of a top rated network variety program called to say they'd like them to audition for a national television debut. At about the same time an agent from BBC Records (The British Broadcasting Company's recording label) got in touch to say they loved the demo and wanted to talk about a recording contract and a European tour. In the music world this was a quantum leap. Amazingly heady stuff.

The group decided to take a few days off for a little "R&R" before the big auditions. "I don't know what possessed me," Tom later told me, "but on the way out of the house that day" (they were still living with one of the band member's folks) "I picked up a little book that had been laying around the house and put it in my backpack as we headed for Yosemite. I couldn't sleep that night. Maybe it was the moon. It was so bright you could read a book without a flashlight and I reached for that book and began to read." It was a simple book on the basic steps to becoming a Christian. "I read the whole book that night by moonlight," Tom recalled, "and by the time the sun started rising over the mountains, the "Son of Righteousness was rising in my heart, with healing in His wings. Jesus became real to me, I received Him as my Savior and experienced, there in that wilderness meadow, what Jesus called the "new birth. It was the sweetest thing I've ever experienced!" Tom said. "I had a peace of mind and soul that couldn't be matched by any drug, or any success, or any other experience in the world." Of the "prodigal" in our first story, Jesus simply says, "he came to his senses" and headed for home.

Tom's fellow band members didn't share his joy that morning. Their whole world came crashing in around them. No lead singer, no songwriter, no group. No group, no TV, no tour, no money, no life!

I'll never forget the letter Tom wrote to me the morning after his conversion. "I'm looking forward to seeing you soon," he said, "there's so much I want to tell you.

The short form is this: I've been everywhere, seen everything, experienced more than I want to remember, and I can tell you for sure there's no place like home. I've had enough and I'm coming home to Jesus."

Tom is a Christian minister today. He's still writing music, still playing his guitar, but now using his gifts for Christ and his kingdom. The other guys in the group also found their way back home too. All are Christians today. One is a successful youth evangelist.

The fact that Tom wrote that letter to me that day was no more an accident than was that Christian classic in his backpack on a moonlit night in Yosemite. What Tom knew when he wrote to me was that I too was a prodigal. No, I never left school. I never went to California. I never did the club scene. Never had the groupies. Never got into drugs. But I was a prodigal nonetheless. Running long. Running hard. Running in place. Spending a fortune's worth of heaven's resources with nothing to show in return.

We used to have a saying in the sixties: "You can take a trip and never leave the farm." Some of the longest journeys away from God can begin and end right within the confines of our own hearts and minds. Before he ever packed his bags in the "Beemer" and rolled down that long drive, out into the street, the young man in Jesus' story had already left home. He just hadn't consummated it until he hit the road. Tom knew that I too needed to turn around and head back home where I belonged.

I've got good news for prodigals tonight, wherever you are. Regardless of where your journey away from the Father's house may be taking you. Whether you're a prodigal of the flesh, a prodigal of the mind, or a prodigal of the heart. No matter how far you've journeyed. I went every bit as far as Tom—I just never left the farm. No matter where you are tonight, you can always turn around and come back home. That's the good news.

There is One who loves you unconditionally. There is One who knows your name. Your face is imprinted in His mind and on His heart. And He's waiting with outstretched arms, running at breakneck speed, to welcome you back where you belong, even while you're yet a long way off. It's not His business to condemn. It is His all-consuming joy to forgive, and restore and welcome you back home with a celebration that makes Mardi Gras at midnight look like a ladies' auxiliary quilting bee on a Sunday afternoon.

He's not ticked off that you've lived it up too much. He's only saddened that you've lived so little up until now. He wants to show you what you've been missing. He wants to give you all of life there is. And precisely because that's how long it will take to take it all in, He wants to give these things to you wrapped up in a gift of life that never ends. You think the kid went "prodigal," spent big, really lived it up? You haven't seen "prodigal" until you've seen Dad.

He hit the ground running. Off the porch, down the lane, through the gate and on to a glorious reunion. Home at last! Home at last! Praise God almighty, my son is home at last!" You can't imagine how much anticipation has gone into this moment. Like an Olympic skier at the top of the course, the old man has envisioned this run a million times. And now his legs are pumping, his heart is pounding and the sound of his feet on the pavement, is beating out the cadence of forgiveness. He feels the rush of wind against his face. This moment of reconciliation is sweet, incredibly sweet. There's never been a sweeter moment than this. It is one of those eternalize moments. One the boy will never forget! And the entire on looking universe of heavenly intelligences will never ever forget it.

He's breaking all the rules, you know. Old men never run. Especially rich old men. It's not dignified. It cuts against custom and culture. It's just not done. It's downright scandalous. Especially when you're running to embrace the blubbing boy who nearly ran you broke.

Prudence puts returning prodigals on a period of probation. Grace, on the other hand, is a pair of strong, welcoming arms. Grace is the keys to the car, a new platinum card with your name on it and an unlimited line of credit, the finest suits and clothes, the family ring, and a party to beat the band.

Friend, I'll trade for gracious excess for prudent restraint any day of the week. How about you? The Father needs no other excuse for his undignified pace. His love and His grace is all the reason he needs to run!

Some say the old fellow flipped out—all those lonely months and years. Totally bonkers! And the stay-at-home brother is really hacked. It's as if Dad's gone overboard worse than the kid brother. It's as if Dad has become the prodigal. Wildly extravagant! Excessive! Spending like he owns the whole universe! Profuse! Lavish! Disgustingly Wasteful! In some circles it's synonymous with stupid. In God's kingdom it's synonymous with GRACE! You can hear the still bewildered older brother. "Dad's gone too far." "Way overboard!" "He's gone. . . well, he's gone absolutely prodigal on us!"

So many myths get blown out of the water in that one wild, wonderful night of uninhibited celebration. People see it with their own eyes. They hear it with their own ears. They touch with their own hands. The one who once was lost and has now come home. They embrace with their own arms, reluctantly at first, and then with increasing boldness, following the Father's lead, the one who was dead and is now alive and well again. They taste with their own tongues the salty, happy tears of joy flowing freely down the cheeks of Father and son as they embrace them both and allow those tears to mingle with their own tears of holy joy.

In one fell swoop, through one incredibly awesome spectacle of grace, the most dangerous and destructive myths in the world get blown out of the water once and for all for everyone, or taking into account the older brother, for nearly every one at the party. Never again will they believe the myth that says "You can stray too far from the Father's love." Never again will they fall for the line that asserts "You can't go home again." And you'll never, ever convince them, not in a million years, that there's any truth at all anymore to the rumor that "Old Men Never Run."

John C. Cress
College Place, Washington
February 1994

Evaluation of Narrative Sermon 1: "Old Men Never Run"
Quantitative items are expressed as averages.

Rank quantitative items as follows: 1 = poor/not very effective, 2 = fair/some-what effective, 3 = good/effectiveness a bit above average, 4 = excellent/very effective. Give short answers for qualitative items.

1. What was your overall impressions of the sermon?

A. Attention Qualities–Interesting?	3.11
B. Cognitive Qualities–Informative?	3.00
C. Affective Qualities–Moving?	3.00
D. Persuasive Qualities–Compelling?	3.22
E. Relational Qualities–Relevant?	3.88

What were the sermon's greatest strengths? Applicability. Feeling; an attractive picture of God. Vivid images, especially of prodigal and his father. Personal not just theoretical. Descriptive. A contemporary picture of an old classic. Good feeling, pathos. Emphasis on grace and redemption. God is "messily" involved in our lives–no distance too great for him to cover. Grace is active, loving, forgiving. A passionately loving picture of Christ. Use of same language to compare prodigal and Father. Use of contemporary story to make Bible story come alive. Use of personal story to bring Bible parable into real life. The image of God running to us. The energy and expression used to push the point. You didn't rehash the story; making prodigal son meaningful to today's culture. Relevance of the topic. Relevance of story to emotions and experiences of intended audience.

What were the sermon's greatest weaknesses? Did sermon need a few more scriptural references?; Tom and John's prodigal experiences not as vivid as Bible's. Is story from 1960's really contemporary? This is not a weak sermon. Nothing from the 1990s–issues similar, more current application needed. Story not always easy to follow, main point obscured temporarily by details. Beginning with a story that is repeatedly used made me question if there was something new you had to offer. No criticism, it appealed to me very much. Hard time with transition from biblical prodigal to prodigal son of today, my mind kept going back to the biblical prodigal and wondering if the story had switched off him. Need a more conversational style–talk to the audience as one person, not many.

2. How did the sermon deal with scripture?

A. Faithful to the textual material?	3.63
B. Emphasis on central theme of text?	3.63
C. A grace orientation?	3.44
D. A balanced presentation?	3.44

What points, if any, made the sermon memorable? Some useful wording, descriptive language. Title and image of "Old Men Never Run." Equating "stupid" with grace–a very direct word, unmistakable. Prodigal as a state of mind, not just a physical journey, we are all prodigals and can all be agents of grace to other prodigals.

Story of Tom. Use of words. Rebellious students can still return. A father running at break-neck speed, almost tripping, with the only care his destination—me. You don't have to leave home to be a prodigal. Many times we take the whole trip in our minds. The story.

What points, if any, made the sermon vital? Proximity to one's own life. Emphasis on God's prodigality, His irrational, lavish grace heaped on the undeserving; Christ waiting to welcome the prodigal back. Grace, not condemnation. Waiting for the returning prodigal, Christ actively wants to participate in life of prodigal—to show him /her/us what life is. He hits the road running, does not passively wait. Strong emphasis on grace and unconditional love. Relevancy to actual students. Emphasis more on Father as saving figure than on son as sinner. Before you start home, the Father is running to meet you. No matter how far we have gone, we have never gone too far. We can "take a trip and never leave the farm." We somehow identified with the prodigal son at a new level.

3. How well did the sermon use the narrative or story format?

A. Movement and progression?	3.22
B. Plot easy to follow?	3.44
C. Linkage of Bible story and our stories?	3.44
D. Integration of preacher's story?	3.50
E. Connection to your life story?	3.56

What do you think the main idea in the sermon was? Though prodigal, we have every chance to return. God's grace is not grudging or funereal. God's grace is wildly exuberant, almost embarrassingly so for uptight, overstarched Christians. Prodigalness, a human propensity, comes in many forms. Grace awaits all. Grace comes running to meet the prodigal with love, generosity and celebration, not with judgment, condemnation. God loves us unconditionally, no matter what we have done. Rebellion is natural, and yet is not final. A Father (my Savior) who wants me back at all costs. God's grace is limitless and enthusiastic. We have all taken a prodigal trip. No matter how far we go, we are not out of God's reach.

What did the sermon mean to you personally? John's story after the Tom story had elements of candor and hope. I was reminded of my own Yosemite epiphany, reading *Steps to Christ* (in the day light) when I was 16. Christ desires an active role in my life. Christ comes to me, too, crying, laughing, loving with me. Christ transcends religiosity—notions of judgment, condemnation. This joyous, heart connection is beyond the prosaic notions of sin, forgiveness, judgment, etc. It is quite revolutionary—even now. Helpful reaffirmation of grace and God's goodness. It means that my personal rebellion does not prevent God from hearing me when I pray. The stories of the prodigal reiterated my own situation—caught in a world of sin—but then the image of the Father running towards me, wanting to save me, showed that I have someone who beyond all else cares about my situation. I never was very prodigal so there wasn't a personal identity, but the appeal of redemption and grace were taken on a personal level. I'm struggling with different areas in my life, so I had a little trouble getting into it. But it was good and I am again reminded God loves me where I am..

- 5. Evaluate organization of the sermon and appropriateness of time usage for the story being told.** I'd like to hear a preliminary summary or a forecast fairly early in the speech. The stories were woven together well. Moving from Tom and John to the spiritual point seemed like moving from narrative to exposition and the transition seemed boring. The spiritual past came alive through the imagery, especially of the Father. Excellent, tight organization. Time usage absolutely appropriate for audience and story. I thought the balance was very

good. The intro was a little confusing (could be shorter before explanation) but no part was greatly overly emphasized. Overall the usage of time was good. You led with the prodigal leaving his house (not spending a lot of time on what we already knew) and concentrated on Tom and the idea of the Father. You may have pushed the Father idea a bit far (sort of a long conclusion) rehashing it several times—thought this may have been annoying for some but it may have intensified the point for others. Well organized. Good flow to sermon. First time through I thought the sermon should end after son's conversion, but second time through relation to Father running came through more. The organization was good. It flowed from A-Z. The time was not too long either. I didn't feel that for the topic and manner presented it was too long at all. Organization is excellent and clear. In closing one-third of the sermon, shorten up the event between end of story and end of sermon.

6. **What did you experience as a result of listening to this sermon? (e.g.: faith, hope, love, God's presence, conviction, guilt, forgiveness, grace, insight, motivation, etc?)** I enjoyed having some of my mountain top experiences validated. Great story. I experienced love and knowing that God will always be there for me. I did have a hard time relating to the today's story in the area that I have not gone off the deep end and resurfaced to the extent that Tom did. Insight into prodigal experience. Further understanding of grace. A feeling of hope. Any real self evaluation says that I am lost. This story told me that I have a heavenly Father that desperately wants me back. He has a passion for me. God's presence—the nearness of the forgiveness (grace) of God. Encouragement and renewed sense of God's love. Light—joy—a sense that I am (as we all are) profoundly, mysteriously loved. Thank you for that, friend. Hope, reminder of the simplicity of God's grace, recollection of intense spiritual experiences and longing for more.
7. **How can the preacher and the sermon improve?** Keep up opening vigor. The Tom story was extended. I think the details could have been condensed a good bit. Build imagery into all aspects of the narration, don't rely on expository words. Trickiest part is describing one's own experience—in this case John's story is like many students in need of reform, but not flamboyantly, spectacularly prodigal—try to build on that mutual experience in an interesting way via humor, imagery, analogy. Preach it again! More natural. More specific relevance to 90's issues. No general suggestions for the whole effect. Stayed too close to your notes—this was not bad because the sermon still flowed. The story of Tom was an excellent example of a prodigal but the tie in with yourself as a teenage prodigal at a young age was not as strong. The main point of your sermon was about the Father who gladly accepted back his son. Your story focused on Tom and you did nothing to illustrate the point of the Father. Was the story just to help us relate to the prodigal which in turn would make us realize the love of the Father? Would it have strengthened the sermon to have a story of how Tom's father accepted him back with open arms? I think John was "aware of the camera"—used his notes more than he usually does, though not as much as I would need to. Work on stories that have twists to them to really give the listeners a "shock treatment." Not that your stories were not good but one can guess the outcome. Treat the audience as one person, not as many people.

Manuscript for Narrative Sermon 2 in the Series.
Based on Mark 10:46-52

Crossroads of Compassion

On the outskirts of Jericho there is a crossroad. At the intersection sits a man. He's nobody, really. We don't even know his name.

The Bible calls him Bartimaeus, but was really not much of anybody, because nobody knew his name. Bartimaeus, in Hebrew, merely means the son of Timaeus. I'm sure his Dad knew the kid's name, but to everyone else he was just "'Old-What's-His-Name'. You know, Timaeus' kid."

There's one more thing we learn about "what's-his-name." Bartimaeus is blind. Got the picture?

He's sitting by the roadside. Blind Bartimaeus, begging. Bartering his last few bits and pieces of dignity for a pitiful pittance of pocket change and a miserable shred of sympathy now and then.

"Have mercy on me," he shouts at the indifferent passers by. "Somebody have mercy on a poor, blind beggar!" He has learned to effect just the right flutter of desperation in his voice to induce a guilty farthing now and then from the hard and hurried crowd.

Bartimaeus is not some air-brushed, picture-perfect poster child for a charity hospital. He's the real thing. Dirty, hot, smelly, desperate! And it's fascinating to watch the crowd react to blind Bartimaeus. Just as skillfully as he has rehearsed his lines, the crowd has rehearsed their role too. They know not to slow down. Don't listen. Don't engage. Don't egg him on. Don't bother!

So they speed up. Shift lanes. Some toss a mite or two in his direction and watch him try to find it in the rubble that surrounds his perch. Sometimes it's a bit of bread. Sometimes a snippet of advice. Frequently a snide remark.

Even Jesus' disciples know the routine. They're in the crowd that day, and so is the master. They are on the outskirts of Jericho, heading up toward Jerusalem. And they find themselves at the busiest intersection in the city, just outside the gates as you start to enter the city.

Now Bartimaeus knows that location is everything. And he's conducted his business on this corner since before most people can remember. The disciples have seen him before and they know the routine. You get to the intersection as the light is changing, speed up to go through on a yellow light and keep accelerating, clear through the gates and into the city.

It is especially important for them to keep on schedule, keep on task today. They've got important places to go, important people to see, important schedules to keep. No time to get delayed at the crossroads today.

Nervously, they glance back and forth as they near the intersection. They can

already hear Bartimaeus' voice. Their eyes tell the whole story.

Have you ever noticed how easy it is for otherwise poised and polished people to feel totally out of place—so uncomfortable—in the face of another person's pain and need? So they do the do the usual thing, the pre-planned thing, the shift-gears-speed-up-change-lanes-and-breeze-on-through thing. Maybe toss a mite or two in his direction as we blow by.

You've been there! I've been there. At the crossroads. At the Crossroads of Compassion. You can't really blame the disciples. You and I know how they feel!

It's so easy for us at the crossroads—at the Crossroads of Compassion—where our the tender part of our nature and the self-centered part of our nature intersect. It's so easy for us to turn down the Avenue of Judgement instead of pause at the Corner of Compassion.

You can't blame the disciples. It could have jeopardized their whole mission for the day. Jesus stops, people stop. He engages, they engage. They've spent whole days like this. Somebody pauses on a mountainside to listen. Lots of people gather. They stay all day. And the disciples have to worry about food, water, security, schedules, the whole nine yards.

And after all, Jesus seems hell-bent on getting up there to Jerusalem. Hasn't that been the whole point of what he's been going on about as they traveled on the road to Jericho today?

And didn't Jesus himself say that we'd always have the poor with us anyway. They were there in the past and they'll be there in the future. What's going to change if I slow down or speed up today, of all days?

Besides, there are institutions. Good institutions to care for roadside wretches such as this. I'll tell you why Bartimaeus is out here! He wants to be! He chooses to be! And who am I do stop him?

You can't really blame the disciples for taking the Avenue of Judgment that day. You see, at the Crossroads of Compassion there are really only two ways to go!

On the outskirts of Kansas City, Orville came to the crossroads. Having just completed his term of service in the United States Navy, Orville was on his way from the Great Lakes Naval Training Center to his home in Houston, Texas.

And somewhere on the outskirts of Kansas City, he picked up a stranger in need of a ride. It was cold and windy and the hitchhiker was most grateful for a warm car and a friendly smile.

Orville was a Christian. A deeply spiritual young man. But to know Orville, you must really also know his dad. Quite a contrast, these two. Orville the idealist. Dad the ultimate pragmatist.

Dad was a Christian too, but far too practical to get very excited about things and go off on some extreme. He was a Christian, and he would say that it's okay to talk about faith and trusting the Lord, but. . . God also gave us arms and muscles.

"No such thing as a free spiritual lunch, son," he would say. His creed was:

“Hard work, taking care of what you owned, and protecting yourself from the nuts and rip-off artists.”

“Don’t be foolish, fight laziness. If you’ve got shoes, keep ‘em shined. If you own a car, keep it clean. Make your bed, mow the grass and never, ever pick up hitchhikers.” Got the picture?

But Orville always had a problem when the rules bumped up against his walk of faith, especially when he came anywhere close to the Crossroads of Compassion.

As they traveled, the stranger poured out his story. He had led a rough life. Recently, he’d been released from prison.

Against that background of this man’s hard life and severe struggles, Orville spoke to him of Jesus. He painted the most beautiful mess of Christ’s death for sinners and His offer of eternal life and transforming grace for all who believe. So much so that by the time they reached central Oklahoma, the stranger had been reborn and announced that this was where he would leave Orville, but continue to travel on with Jesus Christ in his life.

As the man opened the door a wintry blast filled the car.

“Where’s your coat?” Orville asked.

“Don’t have a coat, “ the man replied, “but I’ll be just fine. Thanks for the ride!”

“Wait,” Orville said. And reaching into his duffel and pulling out his heavy, Navy issue, double-breasted pea coat, he tossed it toward the stranger and said, “Here’s your new coat.”

“In all my life,” the stranger responded, “I’ve never met anyone like you. How can I ever thank you enough?”

Meanwhile, back at home in Houston, dad is waiting for the arrival of his son. He has his clipboard in hand—literally! Ready to check off the supplies in Orville’s duffel.

“Eight pairs of socks? Check.”

“Three caps? Check.”

“Six white T-shirts? Check.”

“Eight pairs of skivvies? Check.”

“Two pairs of shoes? Check.”

“One pea coat? . . . Orville, pay attention here. One pea coat?”

“Well, sir?”

“Well what, sailor?”

“It’s not here, dad.”

“I can see that. Where is it?”

“I gave it away, dad.”

“Excuse me!!!!?”

“I gave it away.”

“Gave it away to whom, son?”

(You knew dad was serious when he called you “son!”)

“To a hitchhiker, dad. I gave my coat to a hitchhiker. He had just got out of prison and he didn’t have a coat, so I gave him mine.”

There was a long, long, painful silence. Father and son locked eyes. Finally dad leaned across the table and responded.

“You know, Orville, I haven’t understood you for a long time.”

To which Orville replied, standing about three inches away from dad’s nose, “No, dad, and I don’t think you ever will.”⁴

At the crossroads of compassion, those who take the other road, “the one less traveled,” are often hard to understand.

They take risks most people would never take. They give away what others cling to. Their caring brings them close to another person’s pain. Jess Moody described it this way:

Compassion is not a snob gone slumming. Anybody can salve his conscience by an occasional foray into knitting for the spastic home. Did you ever take a real trip down inside the broken heart of a friend? To feel the sob of the soul—the raw, red crucible of emotional agony? To have this become almost as much yours as that of your soul-crushed neighbor? Then, to sit down with him—and silently weep? This is the beginning of compassion.⁵

Jesus understood. That’s why on the outskirts of Jericho, at the Crossroads of Compassion, Jesus took the other road. Let’s call it the Way of Grace.

He didn’t solve the problem of poverty and world hunger that afternoon along the roadside. He didn’t eradicate the blight of sightlessness.

It’s so easy to feel that even if we reach out to help, it’s just a drop in the bucket. It’s so easy to be paralyzed by the knowledge that if I care this time, for this particular need, there will be a never-ending line of needs tomorrow and the next day and it will never end. What success can you really have with finite resources up against limitless need?

Someone asked Mother Teresa about this once. “Doesn’t it ever discourage you,” they asked, “that after you’ve given everything you have to give and all of the people

⁴Based on a story by Charles R. Swindoll, in *Compassion: Showing Care in a Careless World*, Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1984, 44-50.

⁵Jess Moody, *Quote-Unquote*, Lloyd Cory, ed. (Wheaton, IL: Vactor Books, a division of SP Publications, 1977), 66.

working along side you have given everything they have to give, it really doesn't seem to have made a dent in the overwhelming needs and the overall mortality rates right here in Calcutta?

Her reply was simple, and profound: "The Lord has not called me to be successful. Only faithful.

Faithfulness! That's what was on the mind of Christ that day. Not some human notion of success, as He brought the motorcade to a screeching halt.

His handlers were really ticked off. "Doesn't this beggar know? Jesus is an important man. He's on his way up to Jerusalem. There's a triumphal entry waiting for him in the capital city. There a temple to be cleansed. He has an appointment with the High Priest and the Governor, with a traitor and a thief.

"There's a cross and a tomb waiting at the end of this road for Jesus. How selfish can one man be? How blind can one man be? Doesn't he know that the fate of the world hangs literally in the balance of the next few day's activities?

But Jesus stops, the story tells us. He takes a few moments with a man to whom nobody else would even give the time of day.

He gives him more than just the gift of reattached retinas, healed corneas and restored optic nerves. Jesus gives him new life, new hope, new dignity, a new start and new spiritual eyes of discernment.

Scripture says that ever after that day, Bartimaeus followed Jesus on the Way!

There's no single formula to the Way of Grace at the Crossroads of Compassion. No single ideology. No partisan plan which will resolve all of life's complex problems.

Grace is not a rote response to individuals in need of help. It is a case-by-case, individual, risky enterprise, guided only by an overriding sense of care and concern and a sense that if Jesus were he, he'd do something about the situation, even if it was only to stop and listen.

And things don't always turn out the way you expect.

My wife was gone the weekend I brought them home—a large family I had found at the crossroads. Literally at the crossroads.

Our city was the crossroads. Two interstate highways intersected there, one of them a main, coast-to-coast thoroughfare to California. A major North-South U.S. highway passed through our city. We were even on "Old Route 66," the one made famous by the popular song.

Every homeless person on the face of the planet was headed for California, or so it seemed. And they all passed through my town. And they all had my phone number.

These were political refugees from a war-torn region of the world. I was home

alone and it was a terribly busy weekend for me. They called just about sunset on a Saturday afternoon. Another five minutes and I would have been out the door, headed to the church and we might never have connected.

I tried to place them in a home where their language was spoken. There were members of our church of their ethnicity, but they seemed pretty busy that night.

And besides, all they wanted was to stay for twenty-four hours while they waited for the next bus. They were heading for . . . okay you guessed it . . . they were heading for California!

My wife tells me I don't have the gift of discernment. Maybe she's right. Hey, it's one night, they're nice people, they already have their tickets for tomorrow's bus. How hard can it be?

Actually, it wasn't hard at all. I picked them up at the bus station, showed them where the basics were—bathroom, bedrooms, kitchen, TV and so forth, and apologized for leaving them as I headed out the door once again for several urgent pastoral appointments.

As best I could I told them to make themselves at home. When I asked if they needed me to prepare dinner for them they assured me they could do this. They'd even brought food with them.

Now I confess, it was a little alarming to return home later that night to find my house surrounded by police. It's not what you're thinking! They'd simply gone out for water. I don't know! Maybe they didn't trust the water in our kitchen. After all, this was America. And you've heard the stories. "Nice place, but don't drink the water!"

They'd found a bucket and had gone down the street to the neighbor's house and gotten water out of his outdoor spigot. An alert citizen had observed this petty theft and notified the authorities.

They traced the perpetrators back to my house and I arrived to find a frustrated patrolman trying to sort it all out.

I explained that it was okay. These people meant no harm. They were fresh from the rainforest and unaccustomed to our culture. And besides, these people were my guests and I'd see to it that they didn't take water from the neighbor's house again.

The rest of the weekend went uneventfully. They mainly stayed in one bedroom. The whole family. It was a large family. They probably got tired of my shouting English to them in short, clipped, accented phrases in an attempt to be better understood, if only because of the increased decibel level. I even drank some of our tap water ceremoniously in their presence to show them that it was okay to drink from my tap. Upon reflection, this probably was not a good idea. They no doubt assumed that this was what made me act so weird. Just like they'd been told. "Nice country, but crazy people. And for sure, don't drink the water!"

Actually, I learn a lot from my wife. She really does have the spiritual gift of discernment. When she was the director of a front-line social services agency here in town she used to tell me that her philosophy was this: "I'm sure I won't be able to meet everybody's needs. Some people I may not be able to help at all, at least not in the way

they think they need help. But I can and will treat each individual with dignity and respect, with care and concern. More than telling them, I will try to show them that they are created in the image of a loving God who cares for them and considers them of great worth.”

I like that. I’m proud of my wife. I think she’s on the right track. And, she’d be the first to tell you that neither of us always get it all right. Or that it always turns out all right. If you don’t believe me, just ask her to tell you about the pile of peanut shells under the bed in our guest room and the other, more exotic things she found in our house when she returned home after my weekend of hosting rain-forest refugees unawares.

Sometimes we fail miserably. But by God’s grace, we’re going to continue to choose the Way of Grace when we come to the Crossroads of Compassion.

The Bible says that after meeting him at the crossroads outside Jericho, Bartimaeus followed Jesus wherever he went. So I suspect he was there when Jesus came to an incredible crossroad up the road a few miles in Jerusalem.

There, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, once again, a crossroad lay directly in the oncoming path of Jesus. One way would lead immediately back to heaven and unbroken fellowship with His father, avoiding the indignity and suffering of the other altogether. One simple word, one snap of his fingers, and he would have been whisked down that road and out of danger. The other road would lead to a shame filled, pain filled, slow torturous death for Jesus on a Roman instrument of execution.

Ironically, one way would lead to immediate bliss for Jesus but to eternal loss for us. The other way would lead to Jesus’ death but to eternal life for you and me.

With every crossroad comes a decision. And I have a hunch that Bartimaeus watched, if only from a distance, as Christ weighed that agonizing decision in his mind.

I don’t know for sure if Bartimaeus say, with his newly restored eyes or not, the crucifixion of the One who had brought him health and peace. But I do know this.

At the Crossroad called Compassion, Christ looked upon your great need and mine, and willingly chose to give up His freedom, His security, His status, His dignity—everything that made Him who He is—to take the road less traveled.

And I know this also . . .

That has made all the difference in the world!

John C. Cress
College Place, Washington
April 1994

Evaluation of Narrative Sermon 2: “Crossroads of Compassion”
Quantitative items are expressed as averages.

Rank quantitative items as follows: 1 = poor/not very effective, 2 = fair/some-what effective, 3 = good/effectiveness a bit above average, 4 = excellent/very effective. Give short answers for qualitative items.

1. What was your overall impressions of the sermon?

A. Attention Qualities–Interesting?	3.25
B. Cognitive Qualities–Informative?	2.94
C. Affective Qualities–Moving?	2.94
D. Persuasive Qualities–Compelling?	2.94
E. Relational Qualities–Relevant?	3.69

What were the sermon's greatest strengths? Effective message made relevant. Clarity. Personal story. The interweaving of parallel contemporary and scriptural stories. The old story was enlivened–made more relevant–by contemporary references. Beautifully organized and very human. Useful central idea. Ideas clear, useful content. Attack on our complacency. The story of the family you brought home and how you tried compassion (giving of yourself) to you and your wife. Subject matter. Relevancy. Personal story. Use of humor. Description of Christ’s crossroads at the end. The topic. We as Christians have forgotten what it is to have compassion on other humans in our day-to-day life.

What were the sermon's greatest weaknesses? Began slowly, due to familiarity of story. I think it would have been better to start with the Orville story and then go to the Biblical story. It would have been a more attention getting beginning. No weaknesses observed. Staccato gestures. No apparent organizational scheme. The introduction was descriptive but not real grabbing–failed to get everyone’s directed attention. Tongue-tied speaking. The story of Bartimaeus at the beginning and end of Orville could have had more immediacy. Some of the stories didn’t seem to fit or they were not tied in so that instantly they fit the sermon; I was left searching to place the stories into the sermon.

2. How did the sermon deal with scripture?

A. Faithful to the textual material?	3.29
B. Emphasis on central theme of text?	3.57
C. A grace orientation?	3.43
D. A balanced presentation?	3.29

What points, if any, made the sermon memorable? Personal illustration. The insightfulness of the physically blind Bartimaeus juxtaposed against the spiritual blindness of the physically sighted. The human limitations of the disciples are our limitations as well—we are connected via our humanness. Repetition of title and theme. Several stories. Don’t have to be successful–just faithful. Mother Teresa–comment that she is called to be faithful, not successful. So success isn’t the important goal. The emphasis on interpersonal grace in Christians. Imagery of the visit in the Cress home. “Shut up, Bartimaeus!” Two times when John leaned on

the left side of the pulpit. Orville/father. Mother Teresa. The story involving the marine boy and the hitchhiker was great.

What points, if any, made the sermon vital? The clear, biblical message. The punch line—the best line—the fact that Christ took the road less traveled, has made all the difference for all of us. So simple, yet so difficult. Stories, though extended, seemed quite apt. Value of topic. Acts of compassion may not always turn out the way we desire. That our treatment of others must be a huge factor in our salvation. The point that we all come to the crossroad where we choose to be compassionate or hypocritical and non-loving.

3. How well did the sermon use the narrative or story format?

A. Movement and progression?	2.88
B. Plot easy to follow?	3.12
C. Linkage of Bible story and our stories?	3.25
D. Integration of preacher's story?	3.37
E. Connection to your life story?	3.25

What do you think the main idea in the sermon was? The essential nature of compassion to the faithful. The idea and act of compassion. Reach out to others no matter what, even if you can't do a "lot" of good. Grace and compassion are vital to a Christian walk/witness. The spiritual challenge for the disciples is our spiritual challenge, too. Posturing, philosophizing, theorizing won't feed the hungry. We are none of us too busy, too bright, too incapable of serving Christ. Requires nothing less than our willingness to follow His example with our actions. Grace tends to compassion for others. We need to avoid conventional values and judgment of the unfortunate and adopt Christ's radically different values. In life we have a choice to be compassionate or judgmental and Christ showed us the way.

What did the sermon mean to you personally? It reinforced the point that it is too easy to become concerned with trivia and ignore the important things. A challenging call to responsibility. The call is for me to concern myself physically and spiritually with God's children in pain. We are all connected to one another, and we are all loved by God. If God loves us each one, how can we do less than to share our love with each other. So easy to talk about. So easy to condemn the disciples. So hard to see myself in them. Reminded me to serve in more compassionate ways. It described some great and yet simple acts of compassion—a type of compassion that I can apply to everyday life. It helped me believe in helping others in spite of personal and corporate failures. It reminded me of how I can get judgmental and lose my Christlikeness.

- 5. Evaluate organization of the sermon and appropriateness of time usage for the story being told.** Average. A little slow in places. The time seemed to drag a little—just speeding up your delivery might have helped keep attention. Sermon was organized well. The sequence and stories were easy to follow. I wanted to see a more clearly organized piece. I needed transitions. Some stories were extended and probably could have been condensed. Excellent. Each story had ample time to be and yet each was carefully and skillfully interwoven with the others to create a powerful, collusive whole. Very nice juxtapositioning of stories. No time wasted. Lovely flow from one story to another. Well done, except that Orville story would have made a more compelling introduction. Well organized. Good mix of narrative and expository sections. Moved very well between stories. Very appropriate for personal story to describe first-person shortcoming ("bragging" narratives are deadly). Only time usage section is within stories—use narrative time to create immediacy. The sermon was organized in a very appropriate and good manner. The length of the sermon was very good.

6. **What did you experience as a result of listening to this sermon? (e.g.: faith, hope, love, God's presence, conviction, guilt, forgiveness, grace, insight, motivation, etc?)** Effective parallel between disciples and Orville's father. Amusing juxtaposition of John's knowledge of what was right (in personal narrative) but obliviousness to important details! Thread of Christ and Mother Teresa and conclusion were effective. Sermon emphasized love, God's unqualified acceptance. A helpful reminder of the need for compassion. Some guilt and uncomfortable realization that it is much easier to talk about ministry to others than it is to minister to the unloved and the unlovely. Insight, love, forgiveness, grace—and I must say, a certain sense of shame. A reminded sense of value of compassion. Compassion. The sermon was a motivation for what I can do in a "way of grace" by showing compassion to those around me. Encouragement toward a moral, compassionate lifestyle. Definitely conviction and a new openness to being aware of the "crossroads" of compassion.
7. **How can the preacher and the sermon improve?** Certainly the use of variety in subjects is engaging, but it also can be confusing when the story moves from peanut shells under the bed to the cross to Robert Frost—the transitions could be more coherent. Make the intro exciting—make it grab every listener. Simply speed up delivery—your content is good, leave that how it is. I don't know if it makes any difference or not, but I just noticed that you rock back and forth while preaching. Greater conversationality would be useful, I think. Just keep singing this song—it is beautiful. Maybe we're ready to talk now about concrete ways to implement these principles. The preacher need to retain more of the natural flow and gleam that he has in personal conversation. Develop narrative immediacy to match high quality organization—use specific sensory details (not for their own sake, but to make the point of the story memorable. Humor is effective—try to be more at ease with it. The only thing that was difficult for me in the sermon was the number of times the phrase "crossroads of compassion" [was used].

Manuscript for Narrative Sermon 3 in the Series.
Based on John 12:1-7 and Luke 7:36-50.¹

A Touching Story

Whether she wants to or not, Mary always seems to be the center of attention. Wherever she goes, whatever she does.

Of course, she's been the focal point of desire for lots of men in Bethany for a long time. Some of them just passing through. Some of them among the town's noble citizens.

Mary's been the fuel to keep a thousand flaming gossips burning, whenever conversation wanes. "Oh, and have you heard the latest about that Mary?" you can hear them say.

Except right now you can't hear them saying anything at all because every voice is hushed and every eye is riveted on a lone figure as the crowd forms a silent circle at a discreet distance.

Mary's legendary, "don't-hate-me-because-I'm-beautiful," ebony tresses cascade across her shoulders.

Why is it that physical attractiveness is so intensely craved by those who don't possess it, and often feels more like a curse to those who do? Especially to those who possess it in such wasteful extravagance as the breathtaking Mary?

There is a deep, rich, penetrating fragrance of very expensive perfume that finds its way into every corner of this large room.

¹A case can certainly be made that, despite surface similarities in these two stories about a woman anointing Jesus feet with perfume and wiping them with her hair on the occasion of a feast at the home of a Pharisee, Luke and John actually record two different incidents. For one thing, the story occurs earlier in Luke's gospel than in John's. Moreover, in Luke's account, neither the name of the Pharisee nor the woman are given and there are events that occur in one story that aren't recorded in the other. It is my position, however, that these stories represent the same incident in the life of Christ and that for their own, theological reasons, the evangelists placed their accounts in different chronological sequences. This is the exegetical approach I have taken with these texts for the purposes of this sermon. Thus I have also assumed the liberty to identify the actors in Luke's account as Simon and Mary even though Luke does not explicitly name them and I have blended the events of both stories into a single narrative.

Now, Mary's no stranger to a party, even though she's never on any official guest list. But tonight's party is different. It's not "that kind of party. Simon, a Pharisee, no less, is throwing a big bash in honor of the One who healed him of a dreaded disease.

Never mind where or how Simon got that dread disease, Jesus healed him with a touch. And in his hear of hearts Simon believes that Jesus may even be the long-awaited Messiah. Just maybe!

And so he's thrown a party. John's gospel, chapter 12, tells us that Lazarus was there. Lazarus has been doing a lot of parties lately. Never used to be big on the social circuit, but here lately, his party stock has, well you might say, it's really come to life!

To be honest, it's . . . well . . . it's ever since he stumbled out of the town cemetery after spending the better part of a week six feet under, that Lazarus has become quite the party animal.

Jesus did that, too! The Lazarus resurrection! You remember. He showed up late, after the funeral was already over, shed a few tears, probably more for the living than for the dead, said a few words and then called out for them to roll away the stone that covered the tomb. Boy if that didn't get everybody's attention!

Then in a commanding voice—as if the guy was just in a deep sleep or something and He was there to wake him up—Jesus calls out, "Lazarus, come forth!" Check it out a chapter earlier in the Book.

And just like Jesus commanded, Lazarus came forth! It was incredible! Absolutely incredible!

No more dull, boring parties in Bethany! No sir! If conversation ever starts to wane, someone's bound to say, "Hey Lazarus, tell us one more time about the tomb and all!"

John tells us Martha's doing the catering. And her last name might as well have been Stewart, because this Martha's the very best in town. The food, the service, the presentation. Martha's terrific. Everybody knows: the very best parties are always Martha parties.

My hunch is that Mary is there to help her sister. You know, serve the cold cuts, refill the drinks, pick up the plates, that's all.

Except when you're working with Mary . . . well, let's just say, that . . . well . . . that's never all there is too it when you're working with Mary.

Last time they did this is was just a small, intimate affair in their own home. Nothing like this big spread at Simon's place. Martha wanted it to be just right. But guess what? At the point right before dinner is served, when she could have really used her help, Mary wandered off—it's like her life is one extended daydream. She wandered off to snuggle up close to Jesus' feet ad the end of the couch.

Mary's either grandstanding when you need her the most, or she's simply wandered off somewhere. As I said, it's never easy when you're working with Mary.

That night, she just wandered off.

And this night, at Simon's house. Same thing! Mary's wandered off.

Before her sister can catch her, Mary's out of the kitchen, down the hall, into the great room, across the floor, down on the floor, and snuggled up close to Jesus.

Except tonight . . . tonight . . . she's . . . she's touching him! She is reaching out and touching the honored guest!

Doesn't she know? Doesn't she care? It's not the way you do things? People will get the wrong idea!

And that's when it happens. The perfume. It comes out of nowhere and it's so powerful and so permeating that it stops everybody in mid-sentence who hadn't already stopped already when Mary entered the room.

Their eyes are watering. It's so overwhelming, it's so pervasive, yet it's so rich, almost intoxicating. It takes their breath away.

Mary has breached every boundary of propriety there ever was in these few steps and these quiet gestures there in Simon's banquet room.

- There's the boundary of socio-economic station. Mary and Martha were hired help. There to serve, not mingle with the toast-of-the-town types.

Simon is Patit Creek.

Mary is McDonalds.

Simon and his guests are Brentwood and Beverly Hills.

Mary is more like Baywatch.

- Mary crosses the boundary of custom and culture. Women don't touch men in public. Especially men to whom they are not married. But, hey, this is Mary. Propriety's never stopped her before!
- There is the boundary of situational appropriateness. Keeping your proper distance, determined by the closeness of the relationship:

There is stranger distance. Wary, keep your distance.

There is business distance. Just close enough to do a deal.

There is acquaintance distance.

Casual friendship distance.

Friendship distance.

And then there's the very short distance of intimacy.

Mary has moved from A-Z in one fell swoop. She is at the point of intimacy, with everybody, who's anybody, looking on in horror and disgust.

- There's one more boundary Mary breached that night. She crossed the boundary of upper limits for the exchange of gifts. You know what I'm talking about. You give a small gift. Someone gives you a larger gift. You feel obligated. It's a gift exchange at the office. Someone brings something waaaaaay too nice and everybody feels a bit uncomfortable.

We're not talking about some small token, some inexpensive party favor. You can't buy this stuff in Bethany, not even from underneath the locked counter at Nordstrom.

It's like when I was briefly in Paris and wanted to bring some really nice French perfume back to my wife. If you have to ask the price, and I did, you shouldn't even be in that store, I discovered. I did bring her a designer silk scarf!

Mary's perfume is extracted from the roots of plants grown high in the Himalayas. Imported, perhaps from Northern India.

It's similar to the gift of myrrh bestowed by an Eastern monarch at the birth of the King of Kings. This is a gift of kings, imported by kings, almost always given by kings. It was one of those things that set royalty apart from the common folks, even very wealthy common folks.

It was equal to about 300 days wages. So we're going to do a little math. Let's say that in today's dollars, a modest annual salary is \$25,000. Lots of you make considerably more than that. But let's use that as our baseline. To buy Mary's perfume on today's market, you'd pay \$20,547.94. Except that in the stores where you would buy this stuff, they round off the numbers. They always round off the numbers. Nobody quibbles over a few dollars and cents on a transaction like this. Let's simply say you'd pay an even 20K for the bottle of perfume.

I don't even want to know where or how Mary got that kind of money. The Bible does offer some indication of her former occupation and apparently she was as successful as she was notorious.

I'm not sure what a successful person in Mary's profession makes in today's dollars. I don't confess any first-hand knowledge of such matters, but I gained a bit of insight recently in Las Vegas. And before you jump to any conclusions, know that Pam and the girls were with me and we were just passing through town. We spent exactly one night in Vegas.

It was a family place on the outskirts of the city. I had wanted to stay downtown on the strip, with the lights and sounds of the city's twenty-nine-hour-a-day adrenaline rush. My wife would have preferred to spend the night in Albuquerque. We compromised—no, we “collaborated”—and settled on a nice, quiet, comfortable inn-suites hotel just on the outskirts of any real sin.

We were the only people in the pool that night. The hotel was only one-half full at the height of tourist season. There were only six slot machines. None of them producing (just kidding!). The Coke machine actually delivered soft drinks. It didn't spin, whirl, jingle and light up to deliver six cases of Mountain Dew, if you hit on the right combination of buttons. Just your normal Sprite and stuff.

And I really don't know if she was a prostitute or not. Nothing on her license plate; no name tag, identifying her as such. What I can tell you, however, is that I've never seen a checker at Andy's Market roll up in a brand new, pearl finish Jaguar. Come to think of it, I've never seen anybody at Andy's drive what she drove and look the way she looked.

- How can I put this? She looked . . . healthy!

- Nice tan. Attractive.
- She obviously exercised a lot. Fit!
- And her white shorts and crop-top outfit might have even been tasteful if they'd sold it in her size.

She walked into the lobby of the hotel just as we were checking out, pulled from her purse the largest roll of high-denomination bills I had ever seen and asked the hotel clerk to put it in her safe deposit box. It was an interesting transaction. Very quick. No paperwork, no deposit receipt, no questions on the part of the clerk. It all happened in about forty-five seconds and then she was gone.

I just had a hunch that if this woman spent a year's wages on perfume she wouldn't have been able to keep it a secret any better than Mary did.

Judas, who acted as treasurer for the disciples, and who didn't mind helping himself to a few luxuries, now and then, was not a happy man when he saw Mary's perfume.

Judas is thinking: 'I can't believe this! She should have given the money to me. Man, what I could have done with twenty thousand bucks!' It sounds a little more altruistic however, when he verbalizes his concern: "I can't believe this! She should have given the money to me . . . I mean . . . to the poor. Think of how many poor people we could have fed with the money this woman spent on perfume for your feet!"

Jesus tells Judas to let it alone and to "leave Mary alone. She's done a good thing," Jesus affirms.

Simon's thinking to himself: This Jesus doesn't know, does he. He doesn't know who Mary is or he wouldn't be letting her touch him like that. He doesn't know what Mary is. (Simon, apparently, knows Mary all too well.)

But Jesus does know Mary. And he chooses this awkward moment to tell a story to set things in their proper perspective.

In his story Jesus lets Mary know that in her life she's done a lot of bad things, but now, in this act of devotion, she has done a very good thing and that he forgives her for all the bad things she's done.

Also in his story Jesus lets Simon know that he's done a lot of bad things and the only real difference between him and Mary is that she has been forgiven for much and is grateful and he stands in need of much forgiveness and is ungrateful.

In commending Mary, Jesus lets the people at the party know that the only appropriate response in the face of grace is utter devotion, without reserve, without pretense, without self-consciousness, without worrying what other people will think, and with utter disregard for the cost of one's devotion.

Grace is rarely pictured in the scriptures as something proper, dignified and altogether appropriate. By its very nature grace is:

- outrageous
- scandalous

- prodigal in its inclusiveness
- unlimited, absolute and unconditional!

It runs so counter to our sense of justice and propriety. But isn't that the point? Would it really be grace if it were simply the expected thing?

Grace is an old man throwing the "mother of all parties" for a boy who stumbles home in disgrace, having squandered the family jewels and become the "mother of all losers."

Grace is not exposing Simon for the hypocritical creep he really is, condemning in his hear a woman's gift of love.

Grace is gently letting Judas off the hook in front of his friends, rather than disclosing that he was really a snake in wolves clothing, only posing as a sheep.

Grace is the declaration that there is no debt so small as to be insignificant, and no debt so great that love can't cancel it all, repaying it all, restoring even the wasted years in which the locusts have ravaged the land and eaten clear down to the roots.

Grace is touching lepers like Simon. Untouchables.

And grace is God allowing Himself to be touched, not perfectly, not entirely according to the rules of etiquette, but as a genuine act of heartfelt worship, as an offering of gratitude by one whose life has previously known such shame but now knows something real and important about grace.

Grace is the transforming touch that changes one who used to buy and sell a twisted shred of love into a "former hooker" who now gives all of love there is away for free!

Mary knows what a life of touching and never feeling is all about. She's known the intense longing and soul hunger for human touch and love that can push one beyond the threshold of human shame.

Touch was never a science for Mary.

- She didn't know that one third of the human body's 5,000,000 touch receptors are clustered in the hands.
- She didn't know the physiology of touch. Couldn't tell Merckels Disks from Meisner's Corpuscles.
- Didn't know the difference between Pacinian Corpuscles and the Organs of Ruffini.

Touch was always more of an elemental thing for Mary. More basic. Much more of an art than a science. She'd taken the art and plied it as a medium of exchange. And to the extent that her gift to Jesus is an indicator, she'd pretty much perfected the art and the exchange.

Mary knew more about touch than anybody on the block. She had the equivalent of, if not a Ph.D. in the tactile arts and an MBA in the science of marketing touch. She'd been touching "professionally" since before she or anybody else wanted to remember.

But when she touched Jesus that night at Simon's party, it wasn't a message from her past. It wasn't some echo of a distorted need to touch.

Better than anyone else at the party that night Mary knew what it meant to long to

be touched in meaningful ways, non-exploitative ways, caring ways, ways that affirmed and healed.

And better than anyone else, except for Jesus, Mary knew what it meant to fully experience the touch of forgiving, healing, transforming love and grace.

And Mary knew . . . she knew that when she touched back . . . this time actually feeling something when she touched . . . perhaps for the first time in her life. What felt right was right. For the first time in her life her touch was holy and simple and pure—an act of gratitude, an act of worship, that recognized the true and right relationship between Creator and creature, between Savior and sinner, between Lover and beloved.

Replaced by a love that some said was even more scandalous than the loves she left behind, Mary reached out and touched her Savior and gently kissed his feet.

Mary was the only one who fully grasped the reality of the situation. She was looking into the face of Immanuel, “God with us! The one who created a perfect universe was reaching down and touching her and welcoming even her imperfect closeness, in return.”

Had anyone else even had an inkling of what Mary saw and understood that night, the Himalayas could not have produced enough extravagance to even hope to keep up with the demand for its priceless fragrance.

They’re picking up the heavy stones, now. There’s a blood lust in their eyes. You can see a lone, trembling figure at the center of the mob. Her head is bowed, her eyes downcast, hidden by her long, ebony tresses.

The crowd is poised to perform its righteous act and end another miserable, sinful life when into the circle steps another figure. He reaches down and touches the condemned. Quietly dismissing her accusers, he turns and lifts her up. And smiles at her. And then he speaks. “It looks like no one’s left to accuse you. And neither do I condemn you. Instead I set you free. Go and celebrate your freedom! Go and live in peace.”

I just know that if Mary were here today, to tell you her story in her own words, she’d end it with those words of the One who loved and touched her, and who she also loved and touched. She’d end by simply saying: Go and live in peace!

John C. Cress,
College Place, Washington
August 1994

Evaluation of Narrative Sermon 3: “A Touching Story”

Quantitative items are expressed as averages.

Rank quantitative items as follows: 1 = poor/not very effective, 2 = fair/some-what effective, 3 = good/effectiveness a bit above average, 4 = excellent/very effective. Give short answers for qualitative items.

1. What was your overall impressions of the sermon?

A. Attention Qualities–Interesting?	3.29
B. Cognitive Qualities–Informative?	3.14
C. Affective Qualities–Moving?	3.14
D. Persuasive Qualities–Compelling?	2.71
E. Relational Qualities–Relevant?	3.33

What were the sermon's greatest strengths? Out of ordinary treatment of Mary and other’s perspectives of her. Focus, organization, interpretation. Gave a picture of Christ’s grace and devotion for sinners. Engaging, with high grasp of attention that made the emotion of the story come alive. It ended appropriately. Grace orientation. Visualization of story. Story sequence. Message of conclusion concise and powerful. Making story contemporary–Mary a 20th century person, French perfume, kitchen tasks, etc.

What were the sermon's greatest weaknesses? Did you impose into the story suppositions/interpretations that quite possibly were not likely realities? None. There was one story I had trouble connecting to the sermon story line. I did not perceive much application to my life. The stories that tied in actually threw me off a bit. Needs more warm and natural delivery. Early part of sermon not as tight as conclusion. Some of the asides are amusing. Too much time on the prostitute (Las Vegas) story–uncomfortable for audience.

2. How did the sermon deal with scripture?

A. Faithful to the textual material?	3.07
B. Emphasis on central theme of text?	3.43
C. A grace orientation?	3.86
D. A balanced presentation?	3.57

What points, if any, made the sermon memorable? Mary cut through all the baggage of her personal life to understand truth of Jesus. Understanding Mary’s feelings and motivations. Your description of the wealthy woman in Las Vegas (that you assumed was a prostitute) was quite memorable. I have never put the connection together that Mary the prostitute was the sister of Lazarus and Martha. Grace is not always dignified. The one forgiven much, loves much. The almost sensual connection between Mary and Christ (could have been).

What points, if any, made the sermon vital? Making a connection to the myriad of Mary’s possible feelings and intentions. Grace is sufficient for all! The stories that never were connected to each other were put together into a complete story format so that could see the forest and not just the trees. Mary responded to grace by giving more than we can afford after she had been forgiven so much. Grace orientation.

Amplification of the point that those who are forgiven much have the most to be grateful for. Jesus knows us all as individuals.

3. How well did the sermon use the narrative or story format?

A. Movement and progression?	2.86
B. Plot easy to follow?	3.07
C. Linkage of Bible story and our stories?	3.43
D. Integration of preacher's story?	3.57
E. Connection to your life story?	2.71

What do you think the main idea in the sermon was? Mary, the object of grace, took on Christ's righteousness, while the others continued mired in self righteousness. Lavish, generous responses of love come naturally to those who begin to understand the magnitude of the gift of grace. Grace is an overwhelming, larger-than-life-as-we-know-it, experience. Showed the love and grace of Jesus for sinners. Mary used her talents in touching and her finances from non-kosher business to demonstrate her love for Jesus for forgiving her. Extravagance of grace. No matter what you have done in your past, God's grace is sufficient. Grace is unmeasurable—our response is love.

What did the sermon mean to you personally? Jesus knows me personally. I need to respond to Jesus. It reinforced the incredible human insight and compassion that Christ had. A meaningful reminder of grace and forgiveness. Whatever I have to give is a valuable donation. Personally I was excited to finally put the connection together with Mary and Martha; I've often wondered about all the Mary's in the Bible. I began to wonder what I really know about grace. I love Mary and am intrigued by her story. I wonder what it means to love God as Mary loved God. I'm reminded about God's absolute forgiveness. I am reminded of God's hopes for us. Demonstrating one's gratefulness, while perhaps misunderstood, is good.

5. Evaluate organization of the sermon and appropriateness of time usage for the story being told. Sermon stayed perhaps too long on the almost sensual applications of the story; those aspects seemed almost stretched or maybe exaggerated. Very good use of time. I would not have wanted this story told more briefly. It was effective to concentrate in this instance on one story, using concrete illustrations to reinforce key points. This story becomes more poignant when given clear focus and time to be on its own. I felt the stories were very tastefully placed in the sermon. The Bible stories and the "today" stories were mixed well, and they add to the meaning in the sermon. The references to other Biblical stories, even about Mary, threw me off. A stronger statement of message throughout and in conclusion would have clarified purpose and thesis. Well organized. Needed one more good personal illustration. I felt contents and balance were about right—brief, personal experiences, weaving together of foot washing and stoning stories. Transitions between stories could have been more effective—we started in one story and ended in another; needed weaving into a whole. Sermon had excellent flow through the story. You were able to use story throughout to bring out the points desired.

6. What did you experience as a result of listening to this sermon? (e.g.: faith, hope, love, God's presence, conviction, guilt, forgiveness, grace, insight, motivation, etc?) Love response to God. Powerful awareness of God's love and forgiveness. Good contrast of Mary's sincerity with Judas' and Simon's hypocrisy. Sense of grace and forgiveness. Inspiration to give of my talents no matter how inappropriate. It again reminds me why I am a Christian, because of the love and grace that Jesus Christ offers us—I too easily can forget. Faith, hope, love. Love for Mary and for Christ. Christ's presence, forgiveness and grace. Longing to understand grace better—to

experience it more fully. An enlarged understanding of Mary's feelings, but curious if she understood those herself.

7. **How can the preacher and the sermon improve?** More conversationality. More flowing, less staccato gestures. Slightly more or clearer organization and transitions. It seems to me you are more and more comfortable with this style of preaching; with every sermon we view. Each sermon is carefully prepared and shared with deceptive ease. Just keep writing and keep speaking. Honestly, I really enjoyed it and cannot think of anything I didn't approve of. More interpretation—this is how it applies—would have helped. Delivery, intonation was effective in summation about Mary and conclusions; earlier there was more of a monotone. Narrative content, additional sensory detail would be good. You need to make us feel was are inside Mary's skin—show us the intense human understanding of Jesus' response. My main comment on narrative preachers is that some of them get so carried away telling the story that they tell every detail regardless if it applies to the point of the sermon. You don't usually do that; today a couple of times you marginally crossed this fine line. Nothing in adulterous woman story identifies it with Mary. The stories of the anointing are complex, and a sermon should focus on technicalities, but is it really faithful to the text to harmonize John and Luke while ignoring obvious differences such as the setting in Jesus' life?
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PS: The final comments above are succinctly indicative of observations made by several members of the Resource Group, about my identification of Mary as the key character in both the Luke and John accounts. Some evaluators felt relief to finally have the mystery of the several women named Mary in the New Testament cleared up so neatly in my sermon. The evaluator who penned the concluding comments above was less comforted than concerned about my "harmonization of Luke's and John's narratives. Moreover, there is nothing to link Mary or any of the characters in either John's or Luke's anointing story with the woman caught in adultery, upon whose story I concluded this sermon. Since the Resource Group member who shared the concerns identified himself, I took the liberty to respond to his concerns. Below is the text of my response;

Thank you again, _____, for your thoughtful reflections and evaluation of recent sermonic output for my Doctor of Ministry project. Your observations are helpful in my quest for continuing professional growth in this area.

Your comments about the identification of Mary in the evaluation of this sermon, "A Touching Story," are well taken. I am certainly aware that there is no consensus among New Testament scholars as to the relationship, if any, between the adulterous woman story and Mary or between John's and Luke's accounts.

I have chosen to identify them as one in the same because of more than superficial similarities. It is my opinion that such a harmonization of John's and Luke's stories may be more easily defended on the basis of the theological purpose of each writer in placing the story much earlier in his gospel as a way of demonstrating that while many rejected Jesus, there were others including prominent leaders in Judaism who embraced Christ and His work. This would seem to be in harmony with Luke's overall purpose in writing the gospel to speak especially to Greeks who characteristically would wish to know if anyone of significant stature among Jews, Greeks, or Romans accepted Jesus as a leader and teacher and paid Him the obvious respect such a status would warrant.

I worked through these issues carefully and came down on one side of an admittedly technical debate with multiple facets. Perhaps you're right that the sermon is not the place to sort out all of those difficulties but I certainly want you to know that my choice was not without understanding that a different side of the argument exists with some compelling arguments of its own.

Thank you again for the time and thoughtfulness you give in evaluating this material and especially for your wish to keep me faithful to the textual material at hand.

Manuscript for Narrative Sermon 4 in the Series.
Based on Genesis 25:19-34; 27:1-45; 32:1-32.

What a Splendid Disappointment!

It's the darkest hour of the night. The eery howls of the distant winds mingle with the shrieks of predatory creatures and hurl their haunting laughter down the Jabbok Valley, echoing off the cannon walls. Lighting strobes the hills beyond. Dry leaves rattle and dance nervously across the parched terrain. I imagine woodwinds playing that eerie music that always accompanies the scariest parts of the movie. You know the part in the film where the hand reaches out from nowhere and grabs you.

But this is not Steven King. It's not Alfred Hitchcock. It's not the latest installment of the Hollywood boiler plate psycho thriller horror genre. It's scarier still. This is reality! The credits aren't going to roll. The commercials aren't going come on. The video is not going to be rewound. We're not going to hear once again the final frame of the hit soundtrack. This is not a movie, this is not a video, this is not something cooked up by network television.

This is for real. And it's from the Bible—the book of Genesis. It's the story of Jacob and is all alone, scared to death. Jacob is separated from his family. Separated from his servants. Separated from his body guards. Separated from everything that feels secure to him. And he's far enough away now, across the river, that if he screams he'll never be heard. No one Jacob fear's, will know of his fate will be that night.

He's face to face with death and in the inky darkness all he can see is a huge form circling like a shark. This thing, this creature is moving with the skilled precision of some otherworldly warrior, circling charging, dogging all of Jacob's attempts to land a punch. Waiting for the right moment to move in for the kill.

You remember Jacob don't you? Second born of twins, strong, determined. Like his older brother, Esau, he's driven, but there the similarities stop. Esau is camouflage and combat boots. Jacob is Gucci shoes and Armani suits. He's quieter than his older brother. More subtle. His very name means slick or shrewd. Esau subscribes to Field and Stream, and Solider Fortune. Jacob is kinda a crazy mix of the *Collegiate Quarterly* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

And how he wants to get his hands on Dad's retirement fund! Even though he's the second born twin, he craves the blessings of a firstborn's. He deserves these things! After all Esau barely acts like a believer. All he can think about is the next barbecue with his rowdy friends.

You know the story, I suspect. Jacob cuts a deal, with his impulsive brother. A shrewd, Jacob kind of deal. There's a saying in that part of the country that if you cut a deal with Jacob all you'll get is cut. In a vulnerable moment of bone-gnawing hunger Esau trades away the ranch for a lousy mess of lentil soup. And while the last drops of

stew are still on his beard, Esau realizes that he's been had. Seething, he sets about to wreak vengeance on his brother, Jacob.

The last straw, you might say, was when Jacob also dupes his dad into signing over Esau's portion of the family fortune while the "outdoor" brother is away on yet another hunting trip. Esau gets so angry that he swears a vendetta and takes out a contract on his scheming brother's miserable life. And Jacob doesn't wait to see if Esau's serious, he simply flees and lives a good part of the rest of his life on the run, constantly moving, hiding from his brother's wrath.

Jacob finally meets his match when he takes refuge with his sleazy uncle Laban. It takes him fourteen years and a lousy first marriage to finally win the hand of his beloved Rachel. And he remains in exile, a sojourner, cut off from his parental family. Cut off from the very inheritance that he once schemed so hard to grasp.

The amazing thing about the story of Jacob, is that in spite of his world-class stupidity and in spite of the mess he has made of things, God blesses him anyway. He ends up a very prosperous man with a large family. And finally, after many years, he cranks up the courage to go back home and face his brother Esau whom he hasn't seen in a very long time. It's here in the story, en route back to his home, back to his roots, as his journey is almost complete, that this hand, this sinister claw, reaches out in the night and grabs Jacob, locking him in a "Full Nelson." Jacob is scared.

Those of us over the age of forty love to image that stealth and cunning that can overcome youth, agility and strength. But it's a myth. The crazy thing is it seems to be working for Jacob, at least early in the struggle. He's still not sure what he's wrestling with but he thinks he's getting the upper hand. It's amazing, it's incredible. Maybe it's the sheer adrenaline rush that accompanies a life-and-death struggle, but Jacob actually seems, for awhile, to be gaining the advantage.

Just then the first brush strokes of color begin to light the morning sky. Having survived the night and still on his feet, Jacob decides to make one final charge, one last parry and thrust to deliver a knock out blow. Only he finds himself, suddenly and inexplicably, lying on the ground writhing in pain, with one leg doubled back up underneath him. I imagine it is something like what Mr. Spock, of Star Trek fame, does when he reaches out and paralyzes someone with a single touch of his finger.

This creature, this thing, this whatever-it-is, or whoever it is for whatever reason, simply reaches out and touches him at the waist. And Jacob lies helpless, defeated, awaiting the final blow that he knows will follow and put him out of his misery. But the death blow never comes. Instead this triumphant being stands over top of Jacob and speaks.

For the first time Jacob hears the voice of the one with whom he has wrestled all night long. "Let me go," the voice demands. "Daybreak approaches, let me go." Now that's a silly thing to say to someone who is paralyzed! Jacob could not have detained this being if he wanted to. "Let me go," the voice demands. But Jacob is clever. There, lying in a fetal position, utterly powerless, Jacob says a truly absurd thing. He says "No! No! I'm not going to let you go until you bless me. It's as simple as that!"

"Tell me your name," the voice answers back.

Oh wow, this guy's good! He cuts right to the heart. Anything but that name. Jacob hates those two syllable more than any other word on the face of the earth.

Ja...cob! He hates it because it describes his entire life. He came forth from his mother's womb, second born of twins, hanging onto his brother's foot. This is a scene out of the past. Jacob is a grasper, a schemer. And so they named him "one who grasps by the foot." How he hated that name!

"Tell me your name," the voice demands. So lying there in pain with all of his strength gone, Jacob is forced to spit between his teeth those sounds he doesn't want to utter. And finally He says it. "Okay, okay, my name . . . my name is Jacob.

It's as much a confession as it is a name. For one who has relied on his own wits and energy his whole life, it's only when he's lying there, utterly helpless on his back, hands outstretched in that pitiful gesture, trying to grasp the foot of this powerful creature, that Jacob confesses his need to hang onto the Lord. And it's then and there that Jacob discovers just who it is he's been wrestling with all along.

I know what I would have done if I were God. I would have kicked Jacob around a few more times and slowly walked away with my blessing still tucked safely in my pocket. I certainly would not have blessed one who had acted so miserably stupid. Who as recently as this night was still scheming, still grasping, still clawing, still trying to make it on his own.

But when Jacob confesses his utter helplessness, acknowledging who he really is, and surrenders to the grace that has him in his arms, Jacob receives a blessing that exceeds his wildest expectations. "

No longer will your name be Jacob. From now on your name shall be *Israel*, which means 'Prince of God.'" Now there's a name. It's the name Jacob has wanted since the very beginning. That's the thing he has run all over the face of the earth looking for. It's the thing he had cried and pled and schemed and begged and stolen from everybody in town to try to achieve. And now he is looking up from the canyon floor into the face of the One had wanted to give Jacob this new and wonderful name all along. My, how these words flow healing into a man who has been torn-up and distressed most of his adult life. A new name Jacob, your going to be Israel. You are the prince of God. For one who has been grasping all his life, Jacob finally hangs on to the right thing. And it changes everything.

The modern Chinese Christian preacher and writer martyr, Watchman Nee, in his little book entitled *Changed Into His Likeness*, reflects on why it is that God often reveals himself in Scripture as the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. It's God's preferred way to describe himself and disclose himself to his people. Why not the God of Enoch, now there's a good guy. But Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? That's not even Israel, it's his old name, Jacob?

In this formulation, Nee says, we get a glimpse of our gracious, triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Abraham is a type of God the Father, according to Nee. The beginning of the race, the source, gracious, benevolent, willing to give up his son, his only son, to fulfill his plan of salvation. Isaac is the son of promise and typifies Christ, says the author. Stretched forth on the altar of sacrifice, he was willing to give up his life. That's Isaac.

Then there's Jacob. There is not a more better example of the life-transforming work of God's Holy Spirit than Jacob/Israel. You see it moving Jacob slowly, almost imperceptively, often one step forward and two step, but gradually moving him in the

direction of his transformation to *Israel*, “Prince of God.”

That's the work of the Spirit. That's what he wants to do in your life and my life. That's what he wants to do in my life. And thus the story of Jacob is not just Jacob's story. It's also my story and I suspect it's your story also.

A dentist friend of mine use to tell me that there are only two types of dentists. Those who have pulled the wrong tooth and those who are going to pull the wrong tooth. Only two types. We all mess things up. Pretty royally sometimes.

There are also only two types of Christians—those who have been to Jabbok and those who are on their way.

I wish I could tell you that I've never been to Jabbok. I didn't even need a mysterious hand in the night to stir things up, I did it by myself.

Several years ago our college president asked my to serve in an intern capacity for a year as a vice president of this institution. I accepted, and I should have left it at that. But I decided I wanted to continue serving as chaplain too, though, in defense of our president, he tried to talk me out of it. I wish I had taken his counsel. Over his better judgement, he acquiesced.

I was tough enough to do both jobs I told myself. I even seemed to be succeeding! It was accreditation year, centennial year, and a year of departmental transitions within our administration. And it was fun! It was challenging and intoxicating to my ego. It fed my workaholic spirit. I was doing the jobs of two busy people at the same time! And we did do lots of things and do them well that year.

I don't think I've ever talked about it publicly on this campus before today. You see, I wasn't content to be merely stupid that year, I had to take stupidity to a new plane, where no stupid person had ever gone before. I decided to build a house that year.

We hired a general contractor but I told him I wanted to do a lot of the work myself. “Therapy!” It would be a good way for me to get away from both offices and relax by swinging a hammer for a while. And it seemed to work for a while. It was good therapy for the first hundred days. But the house and everything else sucked me dry, taking up all my vacation time and early mornings before I'd go to the office and every evening when I would come home from the other office and all of my weekends.

When the fatigue began to set in there were things that began to get pushed aside in my office and pushed aside inside my soul. I guess I forgot to mention that during this same year I underwent major surgery, traveled to fourteen different countries, attended several national conventions and weathered an incredible family crisis that came out of nowhere and engulfed our entire extended family.

What I can say is that we survived that year thanks to outstanding staff members and gracious friends. They were patient with me and my excesses and helped pick up lots of pieces that fell through the cracks. I nearly killed two outstanding teams in both offices and concluded that crazy year pretty much in a fetal position, down at the bottom of Jabbok Canyon, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

The good news in Jacob's story is that God confronts us at the point of our

deepest need and supplies just the right grace at just the right time. God, in his grace, came and confronted me with the discomfoting reality that this was, to a large degree, a year of my own creation that could have and should have gone much differently. God came at the moment that I had exhausted every ounce of vital, creative energy and confronted me with my utter powerlessness to change anything around me in the dimensions that mattered most to me in my life.

Do you want to know how good God is? He didn't rub my nose in it and say "Cress, you're soooooo stupid." He didn't need to say it. He surrounded me instead with people who were gracious and reminded me of His restoring, healing, transforming grace.

I wish I could tell you that I've only been to Jabbok once. I wish I could stand before you and promise that I'll never, ever go again. But if I've learned anything from this particular journey to Jabbok it's that, left to my own devices, I'm likely to go there again and again.

And for most of us, like Jacob, it's not until we find ourselves at the bottom of some canyon, carved out by our own hands, that we finally find the wisdom to utilize our last ounce of strength to reach out and do the only thing we possibly can do at that point, which is to cling to the only One who can provide any meaning at all in our lives and Who can transform us into the people we so much need and wish to become.

So when you get to Jabbok—and maybe you're there this morning, engaged in a battle you don't even want to fight—go ahead and fight if you must. But when your strength is gone and you've got nothing left, look up! Look up into the eyes of the One who has never left you nor forsaken you and who has promised He never will. He's been pursuing you and he's very much in control.

It was Jesus, the real, literal, actual Jesus, in the form of an angel, who had his arms wrapped around Jacob during the time of his deepest distress. And it is Jesus who will surround you with His arms of love when all you can do is reach out and cling to Him. He will touch your life at that moment with grace that is powerful and truly amazing and a love that truly transforms.

Well, that's Jacobs story. And that's my story. And when you find yourself at Jabbok, make it your own story too!

John C. Cress
College Place, Washington
January 1995

Evaluation of Narrative Sermon 4: “What a Splendid Disappointment”
Quantitative items are expressed as averages.

Rank quantitative items as follows: 1 = poor/not very effective, 2 = fair/some-what effective, 3 = good/effectiveness a bit above average, 4 = excellent/very effective. Give short answers for qualitative items.

1. What was your overall impressions of the sermon?

A. Attention Qualities–Interesting?	3.00
B. Cognitive Qualities–Informative?	2.80
C. Affective Qualities–Moving?	3.00
D. Persuasive Qualities–Compelling?	3.00
E. Relational Qualities–Relevant?	3.80

What were the sermon's greatest strengths? The story line. Tying characters into today’s world. How the subject was presented. The personal sharing and willingness to be vulnerable. The introduction was fantastic! Attempts to equate/translate Biblical descriptions into a modern parable. Descriptive, imaginative and, in the end, relevant. Good intro and interesting description of Jacob and Esau. The story is sufficiently familiar that your filling in of the descriptions and depictions helped extend our understanding.

What were the sermon's greatest weaknesses? The inevitable drawback of modernizing Biblical stories is the loss of historical perspective; we might forget that God must appear somewhat different now. The extension of the conclusion at the end beyond what was necessary and would have been most effective. Needs better eye contact, more vocal vigor, some revised gestures. Could the depiction of the Jacob phenomenon be shortened a bit, and the applications, illustrations be extended? Feel free to insert more actual narratives (contemporary stories) as your sermon develops rather than near its close.

2. How did the sermon deal with scripture?

A. Faithful to the textual material?	3.40
B. Emphasis on central theme of text?	3.40
C. A grace orientation?	2.88
D. A balanced presentation?	3.60

What points, if any, made the sermon memorable? Jacob’s struggle with the unseen force—your description of his fear and indecisiveness—the hand that reached out to him. The verbal pictures created to bring the story alive mentally. The ability to bring the story into an everyday practical message of hope. Interplay of Jacob’s experience in scripture and personal experience. Jacob’s utter despair and yet his salvation. Some very good parallelisms: “Separated from . . .” “Separated from . . .”

What points, if any, made the sermon vital? Vital because we all face conflicts that seem life threatening emotionally, but have a hard time seeing that God is really there to help—this story does that! Some catchy and useful working and identification. Sermon directed to youth crowd—included expressions the younger crowd

could and does understand. Your final story carried some weight, and it held the potential for being riveting virtually. To be sure, you opened yourself in a kind of vulnerable way, and demonstrated admirable candor.

3. How well did the sermon use the narrative or story format?

A. Movement and progression?	3.60
B. Plot easy to follow?	3.80
C. Linkage of Bible story and our stories?	3.80
D. Integration of preacher's story?	3.25
E. Connection to your life story?	3.00

What do you think the main idea in the sermon was? If we cry out for help, God will not forsake us. Confidence in God's willingness to bless. Jacob got much more than he deserved. God is there to teach us lessons. Reliance on God in face of difficulties. Despair and hope; disconnection and affiliation. A challenge for us not to do everything on our own. The main idea was that God is always there for us.

What did the sermon mean to you personally? You spoke to me with your extremely pertinent message. God never abandons. It illustrated for me that my life needs to have a closer tie, in all that I do, to Christ. You have given me a picture of what I can easily do . . . and if I do, the love of God that will not let me go; thanks! Reminded me to stop trying to work/succeed alone. I had the feeling that I was at the bottom of Jabbok Canyon and was fully restored. The parts of me that are somewhat like Jacob can also receive blessing. It was a helpful, personal reminder and encouragement. The whole graceful thing.

5. Evaluate organization of the sermon and appropriateness of time usage for the story being told. The sermon was an excellent piece of work. It seemed to progress chronologically; that fit for me. I understood you had to reach a certain point in the Bible story for a clear tie-in to your story, but more overall time on your story might have enhanced the message. It ran smoothly like a clock with a message that everyone can connect with. Seemed fine. Very good.

6. What did you experience as a result of listening to this sermon? (e.g.: faith, hope, love, God's presence, conviction, guilt, forgiveness, grace, insight, motivation, etc?) Encouragement. The insight into the life of Jacob varied from my previous observations. Thank you for your God given ability that you share with so many! God's presence. Main idea made me look into my own life for strengthening changes. Hope. I really appreciated the words because they seemed to speak to me and be written for me.

7. How can the preacher and the sermon improve? The believability of the presentation could be better—I believe you feel it, but somehow the speaking gets in the way. Still a formalism and affected quality that seems to me to be a barrier; the result is a feel of oratory rather than genuine communication. This was present at the beginning, but broke down completely when you talked about your own story; then the communication seemed personal and genuine—that needs to carry over into the whole. Speak faster, check gestures, greater audience contact with eyes, shorter sentences. The personal story was very powerful, but the conclusion afterward took too long and detracted from the power—it was between 3-4 minutes beyond the story—should have been 3-4 carefully worded sentences. In the Bible story, I would ask for less of what is already known. Speak faster—some of the rhetoric seemed quite deliberate and slow-paced to me. No improvements that I can pinpoint. I have a hard time with calling ourselves or anyone “stupid” who’s on the “learning curve”—smile, you’re still alive!

Manuscript for Narrative Sermon 5 in the Series.
Based on Luke 24:13-35.

At the End of the Road to Nowhere

I want to share a story with you today and it is my hope that you will have a new experience with a familiar story—a new sense of connection with a lonely road and a couple downcast disciples, and even more importantly, with the stranger who catches up with them toward the end of their journey.

I've entitled the story "The End of the Road to Nowhere," and in Luke 24, the end of the road to nowhere has a name. Luke calls it Emmaus.

I picture Emmaus about the way I picture some of the out-of-the-way communities marked only by small road signs pointing off into the Palouse country, miles and miles down dusty roads which lead away from the highway one travels between Walla Walla and Spokane. Let me try a few of these towns out on you. If you've been there, raise your hand. Please understand that I'm not talking about Washtucna, Khalotus, Dusty or Clyde—those are big places. I'm talking about Hooper, Marengo, Pine City, Malden, Hay, Bengene, Ayer, Lacrosse. I don't see a lot of hands.

Emmaus is "The End of the Road to Nowhere" for two reasons. First, because nobody—not the exegetes, not the archaeologists, not the theologians, not the geographers, not the historians—nobody seems to know for sure where Emmaus was. Luke says it was about seven miles from Jerusalem, but it's not there today in any form that makes it readily identifiable. Second, Emmaus is "The End of the Road to Nowhere" because, if my hunch serves me correctly, sometime early on Easter Sunday, before word gets out about the earth-shaking events at the tomb of the crucified Christ, Cleopas and his buddy (legend calls him Simon), following a Sabbath which was, I am sure, anything but restful, two exhausted, broken disciples, whose hopes and dreams have just been shattered beyond recognition, riveted in shame to a pair of wooden crossbeams and buried forever behind a Roman military seal and guard, decide to clear out of town and put as many miles between them and the pain as possible.

What would you have done if everything you'd ever counted on suddenly got flushed down the drain? I can hear their weary, wasted, voices—can't you?

"Where do you want to go Cleo?"

"I don't know, man. Anywhere as long as it's not here."

"We could go home."

"Yeah, right! Go home and listen to the whole town laugh at the way we bought big-time into the Messiah thing with Jesus."

“Man I was so sure!”

“Me too. More than I was ever sure of anything in my life. More sure than the day I got hitched to Mary.”

“And you were sure that day, dude. For sure you were sure about Mary.”

“Still am! Hey I was right, wasn't I? She's the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“Does she know where we're going?”

“No, she was up before me. Who know where she is now. Besides, I don't even know where I'm going. How could Mary know?”

“Maybe we should have stayed in Jerusalem.”

“Shut up, Simon, Just shut up! I don't want to talk about it, okay?”

“No you shut up, Cleo! Like you had it all figured to turn out this way! Where were you when they were handing out the brains on this one, Einstein?”

“Hey, I wasn't the one...I wasn't the idiot who said....Oh, never mind what you said or I said or anybody said. None of it matters anymore. Let's just get outta here!”

“Yeah, and quick. I hate this place and I'm never coming back.”

The road to Emmaus is hot and dusty. The truth is, all the roads are hot and dusty in Palestine. But when you're hurting—when you can't escape the scenes you've just witnessed in wide-eyed horror, even when your eyes are closed—when the outline of three grotesque crosses rising above a hideous barren hillside has brunt its holocaustic image deep into the backs of your eyeballs. At times like this a hot and dusty road can almost be an oasis. At least it winds downhill. All the roads leading out of Jerusalem wind downhill. And at least, thank God, it leads away from Jerusalem.

I've thought a lot about Cleopas and his friend in recent weeks and months. I've thought a lot about scenes I too would rather would rather not have had to see. I would rather remember my beautiful Mother alive and well and laughing, her blue eyes sparkling as she'd tell the stories she loved so much to tell. And I do remember her that way. I'm glad for all the good memories. But I also remember Mom cold and still—she was rarely either in her nearly three-score and ten years of life. And I can see her eyes shut in peaceful rest. And when I close my eyes I see a place—they say it is a beautiful—where they placed her in the ground, only it doesn't seem so beautiful to me. I miss my Mom. I always will. I loved my Mom and I can't wait to see her again.

I don't know where you go or what road you take when scenes you never wanted to see fill your conscious mind. Or when you've heard voices saying things you didn't need or want to hear. Voices in the distance, voices in your home, voices in your bedroom, voices in your head, voices only you now can hear in the privacy of your own thoughts. Or when you've experienced stuff that no human being should ever have to experience. There are roads that lead to nowhere heading out of every city gate. And the only ticket needed is the wish to get away.

I don't know where it is you choose to go or by what means you choose to get there, but I can tell you of my own Emmaus road. Some folks escape in high performance

four-wheeled luxury. The one with the most toys wins, they always say. Others medicate their way to old Emmaus. You don't feel the bumps so much along the way. It can be chemical, or electronic, or otherwise experiential, but it numbs the pain all the same. For some, Emmaus is a new encounter. A relationship that's got to work this time. How can it be wrong when it feels so right? (I have a friend who has a delightful wife, two great kids, an excellent job, and he's throwing it all away for a woman half his age and a new sport car.) For some, escape is no further away than the desk, the office, the phone, the fax machine, the computer screen, the spreadsheet, the Internet, the ranch, the building site, the delivery truck. Wherever it is they pay you to travel on a downward spiraling road of either overwork or avoidance and escape.

I've seen people exit out the gate of guilt and trudge dutifully down the trail of self-tribulation, all along proclaiming this to be the God's will for their lives, and, of course, God's will for my life too. What strange comfort one can get by returning to the all-too-familiar discomfort zone of guilt. It becomes a substitute atonement where I achieve salvation through suffering for my sins.

I've also seen religious fervor and spiritual excess launch a thousand fated journeys down a crooked pathway of self-destructive anxiety and fear. A strange, intoxicating, toxic faith, that takes way more than it ever returns.

The trouble with so many of these roads is that they are complicated. Risky or expensive. My Emmaus road is so much easier. So much less complex. So much more accessible. I escape with food. All too often my motto is, "when the going gets tough, the tough get pizza!" There is a welcome sense of peace and comfort for me, something akin to spiritual ecstasy, in the presence of a Cinnabon. A heaping mound of french fries can send my troubles a thousand miles away, at least until the heartburn begins to set in.

Now look, I know it's true, God made food good and wholesome and plentiful for most of us in this part of the world. He made it for us to enjoy. How thoughtful of God to ordain that the very things which bring us health and strength and sustain our very lives should also be so delightful to the senses. More than I care to admit to myself, however, even in my most reflective moments, I carry around, on my body, more than ample evidence of my excessive and escapist compulsion toward what is otherwise an altogether good and necessary thing.

It affects the way I think. It affects the way I look. It affects the way I feel. It affects the way I interact with others. It even affects the way I cook.

Now, I'm a reasonably good cook. And I like to cook. I even like to cook healthy stuff and prepare it in healthful ways. The problem is I always seem to cook way too much. I'm not sure I can explain it. I've never suffered deprivation. I've never lived in a war zone. I've never seen a famine except on CNN and I've never been homeless or forced to miss a meal. But my wife tells me it happens nearly every time I'm in the kitchen. What should have been a pleasant little meal of a few simple loaves and fish almost always turns into a feast for 5000 men, plus women and children, with twelve baskets full of leftovers.

This is probably a good time to stop and say, unequivocally, that it is not my

contention that everyone who struggles with a weight problem is traveling down an Emmaus road of compulsive over-consumption. That's simply not the case. There are lots of causal factors—culture, genetics, physiology, morphologic typing and so forth. And life plainly and simply isn't fair in any of those dimensions. So I'm not suggesting that this is your road and your story, at all. I'm simply saying that it's my story sometimes. More often than I really care to confess. This is my Emmaus road. My way to clear out of town and find a little peace and quiet beneath those 'golden arches.' I know much more about it than I ever wish I did. Much more than I'm usually willing to face up to or talk about, except when I remember Cleopas and the story of Emmaus and "The End of the Road to Nowhere." In fact the only things that gives me any courage at all to talk about my struggle, the only thing that gives me any ability to face the thing at all and even entertain the possibility of something different, something better, is the way the story ends.

Cleopas and Simon are out there on the road. They're moving, and that's probably the best thing you can say about their progress. At least they're moving. My grandmother used to say that such people had "Nothing to do and all day to do it in." They really are trying to make Emmaus by sunset, they're just not setting any new land speed records. As they're shuffle along, they're trying to make some kind of sense out of what they've just been through. Trying to remember and trying to forget, trying to synthesize and trying to anesthetize all at the same time, when a stranger approaches in the rear-view mirror and overtakes them on a curve.

Strange thing that He's called a stranger. He's been the focus of their conversation ever since they dragged themselves out of Jerusalem and started down this God-forsaken road. Now I don't know what you would have done if you had been Jesus. I mean, if you'd been falsely accused and executed and sealed away behind solid stone with an elite guard, commissioned by the worlds only superpower, to watch your burial place day and night.

If that had been me and God had raised me back form the dead? You know where I would have gone? I'd have wakened Pontius Pilate who probably didn't sleep too well the whole weekend anyway.

I'd have gone to Herod."You're dead meat, Herod! That's what you are, buddy, stinkin' dead meat!"

I'd have found the guards, who spat and cursed and struck and pierced.

I'd have passed before that mindless, murderous mob once more, the same mob that had yelled at the tops of their empty heads, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

And I would have saved the best 'til last. I would have knocked on the front door of Annas and Caiphas, High Priests in Israel, bright and early Sunday morning. They wouldn't have been so high and mighty any more.

Luke tells us that our Resurrected Lord did none of these things. Christ meets Cleopas and his friend somewhere near the end of their journey on that dusty road. This story is the longest of the post-resurrection appearance narratives. In fact, this story in

chapter 24 is longer than all other accounts of the resurrected Christ in all four of the gospels. It's as if Luke, the physician, finds the focal point of the resurrection in the fact that two deeply wounded souls, two virtual no-names in the larger circle of Jesus followers, find healing on resurrection Sunday, near the outskirts of Emmaus, near "the End of the Road to Nowhere."

Jesus asks them to tell their story to Him. And He listens intently. Christ listens, He cares, and then He shares. He shares a new perspective on the scriptures. He becomes a new presence at their table. And He interjects a new power into their lives that changes everything. Now Cleopas and his buddy, filled with new hope, new courage, new life and an incredible new story turn 180 degrees around and head, in haste, back up the road they've just traveled to tell everybody they can find along the way and in Jerusalem the absolute best news in the world.

"Jesus is alive and well! We've seen Him with our own eyes. He came and revealed Himself to us. Us, people, us! Can you believe it? Just me and Cleo, here! Just Cleopas and Simon! Not Simon Peter, not Simon the Leper, not Simon the Pharisee, just "Simple Simon" and his crazy sidekick, Cleo! And now we know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that it's true. He's got the keys to heaven and hell, guys! And He's got you and me! And His love is more powerful than death itself! And He will never, ever let us go!"

When I close my eyes I can picture another scene. I see Simon and Cleopas standing on the Sea of Glass, getting ready to meet up with Jesus again. And when I listen, I can hear their voices one more time.

"Where was it that we saw Him, Simon? Tell me one more time."

"Ah, yes, that's the best part of the story, isn't it Cleo? You won't believe where we were. It was the end of the road, man. The absolute end of the road!"

"Where was it, Simon? What was the name of that place?"

"I forget what they called it, but one thing I know for sure, It was at the end, the living end! It was way at the end of the road to nowhere!"

John C. Cress
College Place, Washington
April 1995

Evaluation of Narrative Sermon 5: “At the End of the Road to Nowhere”
Quantitative items are expressed as averages.

Rank quantitative items as follows: 1 = poor/not very effective, 2 = fair/some-what effective, 3 = good/effectiveness a bit above average, 4 = excellent/very effective. Give short answers for qualitative items.

1. What was your overall impressions of the sermon?

A. Attention Qualities–Interesting?	3.22
B. Cognitive Qualities–Informative?	2.78
C. Affective Qualities–Moving?	3.00
D. Persuasive Qualities–Compelling?	2.87
E. Relational Qualities–Relevant?	3.33

What were the sermon's greatest strengths? Personal story–death of Mother. It’s relevance for today. Made the two guys on Emmaus Road come alive. Equating Emmaus road with escape. Good joke about feast for 5000. Held the audience’s attention. Your vulnerability. Unique approach to a familiar story–increased the interest factor. Interweaving of Bible’s story with your story, both of you looking for a way of escape from things you didn’t want to deal with. The imaginative qualities in telling the story–dialogue between the two worked for me/ I could hear them. Good use of humor. Title and imagery is gripping–“End of the Road to Nowhere.” Application to today, my life. Strong emphasis on God’s grace. Picture of God pursuing us, even when we’re running (or walking, in this case) away. The story’s relevance for today. Came to a smooth, natural, powerful ending; picturing Cleopas and friend in heaven, celebrating God’s grace; creative projection of narrative beyond what the Bible explicitly states.

What were the sermon's greatest weaknesses? When the scripture reading is long, the reader needs to be more effective. The carefully crafted, even ornate, language needs to sound natural, not read. No weaknesses observed; just right for me. Not much emphasis on second son; was this a complete narrative? Did you take too many liberties with the text?–dialogue not in the Biblical account, picturing the two friends on the Sea of Glass? Work on your conversational style; talk to me, don’t preach at me. Did you get carried away with creative approach–I liked it, but found it a bit fanciful, maybe ultimately distracting. The dialogue between Cleopas and Simon seemed contrived, not real and persuasive for me. No weaknesses; this was a very strong sermon. I think I liked it better when you were a “discursive” preacher!–maybe I’m just having a hard time understanding narrative preaching; it’s not bad, just don’t know if it’s for me–I’ll keep trying. I’ll say it again: adopt a conversational tone–maybe less reliance on your manuscript would help.

2. How did the sermon deal with scripture?

A. Faithful to the textual material?	3.00
B. Emphasis on central theme of text?	3.25
C. A grace orientation?	3.37
D. A balanced presentation?	3.12

What points, if any, made the sermon memorable? The comparison between the scriptural Emmaus road and the road of each individual. I don't know if the story was faithful to the text or not, but changing the story from two guys who didn't recognize Jesus to two guys who were trying to escape from reality brings real meaning into the text. You took an oft-repeated Bible story and made it so applicable to problems we all face. The beautiful things you said about your Mother. Illustrations very good. Powerful Easter sermon—Jesus is alive and ready to help us. Your willingness to be vulnerable, and to touch on aspects of life affecting us all, caused an “amen” to rise up within me; this kind of preaching brings the gospel to where I, and others, live today—Thank you! All those little, “nowhere” towns near Walla Walla—I got the picture of Emmaus. Fun, lighthearted dealing with very serious subject made it interesting and palatable—e.g., “Simple Simon and his crazy pal, Cleo.” The description of the many ways we all “escape.” The hope for those who are running scared—isn't that all of us? It fit the season so well; we don't hear enough sermons on the resurrection.

What points, if any, made the sermon vital? Jesus, instead of making himself known to mankind, appeared to two men who needed him. The grace orientation—stories filled with grace. Filled with hope for people who struggle and don't always make the best choices. Loved the wonder in the two fellows' “voices” when, in heaven, they're still remembering how Jesus met them on the road to Emmaus—we'll spend eternity trying to wrap our minds around the grace of God. Powerful imagery. Your story was human—I could identify with you and with the story of Cleopas. An uncompromising celebration of the love of God, expressed in Jesus Christ. Real characters, real life challenges—a real solution, Jesus!

3. How well did the sermon use the narrative or story format?

A. Movement and progression?	2.89
B. Plot easy to follow?	3.00
C. Linkage of Bible story and our stories?	3.00
D. Integration of preacher's story?	3.67
E. Connection to your life story?	2.89

What do you think the main idea in the sermon was? Jesus will come to those who need Him. Christ will never leave us or forsake us. Grace is greater than we think. Both the initial sense of alienation and the eventual flash of recognition of the Emmaus experience might be our experience too. An approach to escapism. Even when we've deliberately chosen a path away from Him and from responsible living, God does not abandon us; instead He sends His son to “catch up” with us, regardless of the “road to nowhere” we may have chosen. Nobody is beyond hope and beyond the love and grace of God. It is naturally human to wish to find a way out of difficult situations; Jesus understands.

What did the sermon mean to you personally? Thank you for a sermon that was really worth going to church for. Together in Christ we strive and God won't let me down. A renewed sense of the amazing grace of God. It provided a meaningful context for dealing with moments of alienation. All of us go down an “Emmaus Road”—it may be different from the next person's, but it's an “Emmaus Road”—and when we do, Jesus is there with us. Christ deals gently, lovingly, graciously with me when I am most in need of His grace. How much I need God; even disciples can get discouraged. Even when we think we are a long way off from God, He is just around the bend in the road. I got a new sense of how much God loves me and how far He will go to turn me around and save me. I was deeply moved by the picture of Jesus listening intently to the forlorn disciples before giving them the “answer”—convicted that I don't listen enough, but want to rush to answer.

5. **Evaluate organization of the sermon and appropriateness of time usage for the story being told.** The initial narrative needed to be longer to provide a stronger anchor for the sermon. Leave out erudition like “longest post-resurrection appearance narrative”—it doesn’t enhance narrative setting. No problem with the use of time—most appropriate. Your conclusion was brief, succinct and future focused—just right! The sermon moved easily and naturally from the story of two men on the road to Emmaus to your story, to our story (we all have ways of escape) back to the two main characters. Excellent use of time. I got bogged down a bit when you felt a need to stop and explain that you weren’t accusing everyone of having an eating disorder—I hadn’t heard you say that in the first place, didn’t need to apologize. This sermon moved quickly for me, from start to finish.

6. **What did you experience as a result of listening to this sermon? (e.g.: faith, hope, love, God's presence, conviction, guilt, forgiveness, grace, insight, motivation, etc?)** God’s ability to relate to human emotions and weaknesses. Hope! God’s presence. Although I was too shy, I wanted to stand up and shout, “Preach it brother, preach it!”—I was deeply moved. The gospel in a simple story. A reassurance of God’s presence in the midst of my struggles. Grace! A “Grace Orientation” to a story I had not thought about in this way before. Thank you for an important “Sabbath” blessing.

7. **How can the preacher and the sermon improve?** The part where Jesus meets the disciples cries out for narrative. Some verbal stumbles. The initial description of the Road to Emmaus needs to be strongly descriptive with a lot of descriptive detail and plausible dialogue. A bit overreaching on slang—“Shut up—where were you, Einstein?” “Herod, you’re dead meat.” Tell, don’t preach the story! Nothing to suggest—I liked it, it spoke to me. Memorize your intro and conclusion—you read from a manuscript well, hardly noticeable, but we need to see you connect with us when you’re beginning and ending the sermon.

Manuscript for Narrative Sermon 6 in the Series.
Based on John 9:1-41.

Only the Heart Can Truly See

It didn't matter that I was 14 and Chris was 21. We were friends! He was cool! Way cool! And he had a large repertoire of great jokes. Two or three of them I could even tell at home.

One of the things I'll never forget about Chris was his voice. Big. Loud. About 50 decibels above everyone else's. When I close my eyes I can still see Chris, with his head tossed back, laughing in that way too loud laughter.

I'm not sure what Chris sees when he closes his eyes. Maybe the same thing he sees when his eyes are open, but I doubt it, because Chris had a huge imagination. But the eyes thing, for Chris, well that's a puzzle. Because Chris was visually impaired. Optically challenged, someone might say today. Back then Chris was just plain blind.

Somebody once told me that visually impaired people compensate by developing hypersensitive hearing capabilities. Now that's probably just something some sighted but not insightful person came up with, but if there were ever a person to make me pause and wonder about this theory, it was Chris.

We actually tested the hypothesis out on Chris one summer. A couple of adolescent friends and I would sneak just beyond the "normal" hearing range and begin to produce a variety of clicks, clucks, whistles, squeaks and chirps and probably a few unmentionable sounds, as well, to test the hearing of our friend, Chris.

I don't know if his hearing was more keen than average, because our testing methods lacked a certain scientific rigor, but Chris's sense of discernment was sharp indeed.

"All right, you bums. Come out wherever you are and quit making that racket!" Chris would bellow. "I know its you turkeys and I know exactly what you're up to, so come on out and cool it with the noise making."

Getting caught was half the fun. He'd call us over and make a point of laughing at us, not with us, and then he'd launch into telling another of his famous funny stories.

I'd like to believe that the disciple's curiosity about the man born blind was a bit more sophisticated than our own adolescent inquiries, but I can't say for sure. After all, this was Peter, Andrew, James and John.

What I do know is that when they saw this poor chap panhandling by the roadside, they immediately presented Jesus with this question:

"Teacher, who sinned, this man or his parents?" A tragedy of this magnitude, in their minds, was obviously the result of God's retribution on some poor, miserable

sinner. It was just a matter of finding out which poor, miserable sinner was to blame. I wish I could tell you that it was the Pharisees who brought the question up first, but these were the guys who hung around with Jesus all the time. Should have known better.

My Mom was sensitive before sensitive was cool. She wouldn't have liked the disciple's questions. It lacked a certain tact and dignity.

As kids, we weren't allowed to mimic or make fun of persons who were different or who were differently-abled. We were taught to respect all of God's children, regardless of their particular abilities. I'm glad My mom never learned about my antics with Chris.

Mom had little patience for rude, crude, thoughtless and insensitive people. Raising a family of all guys must have been a thankless task for Mom, but this too she did with grace and dignity.

Willful ignorance and mindless prejudice were the twin evils of an unenlightened mind in Mom's book. She would have confronted the disciples about their thoughtless question. She would have done it head on, too.

I can just hear her saying to those rough Galileans, "Boys, your mothers raised you better than that!" That was her favorite line when occasionally, well okay, pretty much all the time, her own boys were out of line. She'd simply say, "I raised you better than that!"

Jesus responds a bit more gently. "Hey guys, listen up. Nobody sinned here. I mean, all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, but that's not what this is about! If it were, then everybody would be blind. Think of this as an opportunity for God to be at work in this person's life."

Think about it. Blindness not as punishment, but possibility?

These twelve guys are Jesus' most faithful followers. A little slow to learn, but eager nonetheless.

Maybe today . . . maybe today if they keep their eyes open . . . maybe today they'll see something really important about a loving Father who doesn't strike babies blind because they or their parents have done something dreadfully wrong.

Maybe they'll come to believe the things He's been saying about Himself all along, that He is indeed the Son of God, the very nature of God in human flesh. Maybe they'll catch a glimpse today of what it means that Messiah comes to bind up wounds, forgive sins, set captives free and restore sight to those who are blind.

So far the disciples have learned to formulate quasi-intelligent sounding questions about suffering. They can analyze suffering. They know how to discuss it objectively. They can speculate, theorize, philosophize and theologize about suffering. Maybe, just maybe, if they keep their own eyes open today, they'll see very clearly that it doesn't do

much good to merely talk about suffering. Maybe from now on they won't be able to pass by a person in distress without stopping and trying to do something about it. Maybe they'll lose some of their own discomfort around those who are afflicted and suffering.

One of the most fascinating discussions I ever heard took place at the country club one evening several years ago. Members of the Ministerial Fellowship at the invitation of members of the Medical Society, met to share an evening of good food and mutual professional development. The moderator for the evening, a physician, introduced three guests who shared their stories about being patients in a hospital and their experiences of medical and pastoral care.

The physicians got it first. "My doctor never came close to my suffering," a survivor of a long, life-threatening illness, told the physicians. "He hid behind diagnoses and prognoses, all couched in technical, medical jargon. He insulated himself from me and my pain with his professional vocabulary and his talk of statistical probabilities. I felt like an object being analyzed, not like a human being who needed healing.

Wow, that was pretty direct. Made me glad I wasn't a doctor. What came next, however, made me think about going to medical school.

"When my pastor came to see me," one patient, who by that time was fully recovered, said, "he refused to believe my illness and refused to acknowledge the depth of my pain."

"My pastor used God talk," another former patient told group. He displayed his seminary vocabulary and hid behind his theological jargon in such a way that he didn't have to touch me. He didn't have to get close to me."

"Let me tell you something," another impassioned patient told a rather stunned group of "caring professionals." "I got better in spite of the services you rendered."

"All I wanted was for someone to draw close," the third guest said. "To acknowledge that I was scared out of my wits. That I was in pain. That more than likely I was going to die. And that I was very afraid. I wanted someone to say that things were going to be okay. And even if they weren't going to be okay, that they understood my fear and that they'd be there with me throughout whatever lay ahead. That's all I wanted and you didn't come through for me."

I am deeply indebted to those brave people who bared their souls and shared their stories in an attempt to raise the quality of care and caring in our community.

John doesn't tell us the name of the man, because, the truth is, he could have been any one of us.

I'm a part of this story, and so are you. I can't tell you exactly where you fit in, but you're there, you're a part of this story. How do I know? Good stories are like that. They don't keep you on the sidelines, they draw you out onto the field.

Anytime we hear the narratives of Scripture—if we’re careful, if we go in with our eyes open and our spiritual senses alert—we’ll find ourselves walking along with Jesus, down those dusty roadsides of Palestine.

So rather than me tell you where you fit into the story this morning, let me try and tell the story and we’ll let the holy Spirit cast the parts.

Jesus spits on the ground and with a combination of saliva and roadside dust, he makes a poultice of clay and places small mud packs on each of the man’s eyes. Then he sends the blind man to wash off the clay in the Pool of Siloam.

Truthfully, I don’t know why Jesus spit. My wife says “it’s a guy thing. Men spit.” You don’t see women going around doing that,” she enjoys pointing out.

Actually, I’m a pretty accomplished spitter. Distance. Accuracy. That kind of thing. My wife is not impressed!

Spittle had a better reputation among the ancients than it does with my spouse. Persius, Tacitus, Pliny the Elder and the Rabbis in the Mishna, all extol the medicinal values of spittle in the healing process. I just love those guys!

My wife is quick to point out that they are all guys.

Some theologians say that what we have here is the Creator taking dust to form clay to recreate the eyes he formed in the very first man out of the very same stuff. Others say that muddying the man’s eyes provides a tangible way for him to act on his faith. The man needed to go and wash in the pool. He is given something to do in obedience to Christ’s command.

I’d like to suggest one more possibility. This is “Sabbath spit.” That’s right, “Sabbath SPIT!” Deliberately and confrontationally prepared by Christ in violation of the oral tradition of the church leaders. And it works! The Pharisees get really ticked off!

I simply can’t imagine what it must have been like to suddenly go from a world of absolute darkness to a world of incredible, glorious light and visual acuity. But that’s exactly what the man experienced when he washed away the clay in the Pool of Siloam.

There is an amazing economy of words in the Bible. The last part of John 9:7 simply says, “The man came home seeing!”

I prefer to think that the man came home shouting because that’s what I would have done.

But what if it happened exactly the way the Bible says it did. He just “came home seeing.” Picture the scene. The man heads for home, but decides, just for fun, to play it really cool.

He’s on his way home and he can see his friends although they don’t know that. Now he’s never actually seen his friends, but he knows the street corners where they hang out and he knows their voices well. He knows these guys, but they look . . . well, they look funny. Different that the way he had imagined them looking.

As he draws near his friends and ascertains that they are watching him, he deliberately walks straight toward a large pyramid of pomegranates in the open air market. These guys have been having fun with him all his life, at his expense. Now he's going

"Oh no, his friends say among themselves. "Hey, watch Jamil. He's going to wipe out that dude's entire produce stand! "Somebody stop him!"

"What, are you crazy? Shut up and watch!" They've seen it all before. It's a great diversion. Nobody says a word. Sometimes your friends can be really cruel.

But when Jamil gets about two paces from the pomegranates, suddenly, and for the first time in his life, gracefully, he sidesteps the green grocer and glides on by with the fruit stand all intact. No crash and burn. No angry merchant. No humiliation. No fun!

"Whoa . . . did you see that?" Jamil's friends look at each other in astonishment and start to follow him down the street. A ball rolls into the street. Jamil stops, picks it up, tosses it into the air a couple of times, puts it back on the ground and place kicks it right through the homemade uprights at the end of a makeshift cul-de-sac soccer court.

"That's not Jamil," one of his friends says. "That guy can see and Jamil's blind as a bat."

"Yeah, he doesn't even have his white cane, man."

"That's not Jamil!"

Charlie can hear his friends following him. He's loving every minute of this. He's just "coming home seeing."

He stops on a street corner and turns to an elderly woman. "Good morning, Mrs.M.," he says.

"Hey, aren't you the kid who used to beg in front of the temple? Aren't you . . . ? No, couldn't be. . . Impossible!"

"May I help you across the street, Madam?" he asks, reaching out to take her arm and proceeding to weave in and out of a moving maze of pedestrian, donkey and camel traffic, with a few sheep tossed in just to make it interesting. All the while the old woman just keeps looking at him and shaking her head back and forth.

"Impossible. . . Impossible!" she keeps repeating to her self. "But, he sure looks like that blind guy.

"It's Jamil, guys," another one his friends is running and shouting, now. "Only, this guy can definitely see. "Yo, Jamil," his buddy calls out to him. And Jamil turns around and greets his friends. "Hey guys! What's new?" And does he ever have a story to tell them.

"So let me get this straight, Jamil. This guy . . . this guy, Jesus . . . he comes up to you, spits in your eyes, tells you to go wash up at Siloam and when you do you can see? And . . . and . . . and then, cool as a cat, you just come home seeing?"

"Where is this guy, Jesus? We've gotta meet Jesus!" Even the ones who are the most cynical among his friends are now believers and they go off together in search of Jesus.

Faith often begins with questions. Sometimes it sounds a lot like doubt. But it never ends with questions. At least not the same questions over and over again.

The sign of a mature faith is a settled conviction about who God is and who we are and an affirmation of the positive relationship between us based on His forgiveness and faithfulness.

It is being able to say, along with the Apostle Paul: "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-9)

Now the Pharisees are a different story. Their response to an obvious miracle of God takes a bizarre turn.

"Jamil, tell us once again about the spit and the mud." They focus on the methodology of the healing, all along refusing to acknowledge that an actual healing has taken place, even when it's standing before them and staring them in the face.

"The man made mud on the Sabbath. We've got a problem, here, Jamil! Section 17, part 3, subheading C, codicil iii-b. This guy broke the law."

"We've come to the conclusion that this guy cannot be from God, Jamil. He broke the Sabbath when he spit and made mud."

"Sorry, Jamil."

"Excuse me," Jamil cries out. "Time out, here! I think you're overlooking something. I've been blind as long as I can remember. No, correction. I've been blind longer than I can remember. I was born blind. But now . . . now I can SEE! Don't you get it. Don't you need to factor this into your assessment of the situation?"

"We ask the questions, here, Jamil. Let's go over it once again. What about the mud?"

"Enough about the mud already. Jesus healed my eyes. I was blind, now I see! End of story."

"Give God the glory, Jamil. We know that this Jesus character is a sinner. The worst kind."

"Call him anything you like. I really don't know if he's a sinner or not. But let me tell you what I do know. You see these eyes? They were dead! Now they're alive! Am I the only one around here who can see this?"

And you know the rest of the story. They call his folks in to testify and they're in shock, and they're amazed, and they're scared. All these powerful suits questioning and intimidating them, hurling questions at them. What did they do?

The Pharisees are in a pickle. To focus on the healing would be to acknowledge Christ for who he claims to be. They'd have to admit that there's something greater and more important than their traditions. They'd have to admit that Jesus not only has the power to heal blind eyes but that he has the power to forgive sins as well. "Haven't you heard? That's what he's going around saying these days. Claiming to be able to forgive people's sins."

It would call into question their standing in the academic and spiritual circles. It might lead to changes in their curriculum. It might call into question their tenure as teachers of the Holy Writ.

What a day it was for seeing in Jerusalem that day. Lots of people get their vision enhanced. Jamil can see things he's never seen before.

The disciples now can see that there's something more important than analyzing suffering. There's responding to it in gracious, healing action.

Jamil's friends can see that there is power in the name and touch of Jesus. Power alive and abundant. Power to heal. Power to save.

Even Jamil's parents, despite their timidity, are beginning to see the bankruptcy of a system long on tradition and short on compassion.

You know the ironic thing. It's the Pharisees. They're partly right. Sin does lead to blindness. The sin of disbelief and the dismissal of God's revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ causes people to go positively blind!

The Light of the World is in their midst. But they refuse to see the light! So, in the end, they become living testimony to the fact that they have the equation partially correct. Sin does lead to blindness. Not like in Jamil's or his folks' case. Their sin didn't cause the kid's blindness. And Jamil's being a sinner wasn't what caused him to be blind. But the Pharisees sin of disbelief and dismissal of the stuff that was right there in front of their eyes, actually leaves their spiritual eyesight severely impaired. They come to experience a darkness more complete and more impenetrable than anything Jamil ever experienced.

So now hear the conclusion of the story in John's own words. Ch. 9, vv. 35-41:

“Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

“Who is he?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.”

Jesus said: “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.”

Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him.

Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.”

Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, “What? Are we blind too?”

Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains."

Whether your heart is open to Christ and the work he wants to do in your life is the most important thing in the world.

And sometimes the most important things in the world can be missed by people with 20/20 vision.

Sometimes the most important things in the world . . . only the heart can truly see.

John C. Cress
College Place, Washington
July 1995

Evaluation of Narrative Sermon 6: "Only the Heart Can Truly See"
Quantitative items are expressed as averages.

Rank quantitative items as follows: 1 = poor/not very effective, 2 = fair/some-what effective, 3 = good/effectiveness a bit above average, 4 = excellent/very effective. Give short answers for qualitative items.

1. What was your overall impressions of the sermon?

A. Attention Qualities–Interesting?	3.37
B. Cognitive Qualities–Informative?	3.00
C. Affective Qualities–Moving?	3.12
D. Persuasive Qualities–Compelling?	3.50
E. Relational Qualities–Relevant?	3.37

What were the sermon's greatest strengths? I could "see" the blind man in the story, your description was vivid in my mind. Clear, imaginative ideas. "Jamil" became me, as I grasped the miracle of "new sight." Balance of story to analysis. Blind man became real. The insight of Jamil. Starting out with Chris and your humorous relationship drew me into the sermon, even before I knew where you were going with it. Powerful characterization of the blind man. The focus on Christ's love.

What were the sermon's greatest weaknesses? [This is not a "great" weakness, but I wondered in two places if the dilemmas of both the disciples and the pharisees were somewhat simplistically treated to make a point. I asked myself (and I'm not sure I know the answer to this question) when the disciples asked Christ who sinned, was this not the prevailing attitude toward people with infirmities? If this is so, the disciples would not seem to be *insensitive or barbaric in their understanding*. Rather, Christ could be seen as the radical who suggests a transcendent view on the subject. Likewise, I was a little uncomfortable with the less than full characterization of the Pharisees. I feel sure you didn't mean to cast them as total villains, but I think we are so inclined to see them this way, we fail to recognize (A) the place of the law in the spiritual journey and (B) the very real struggle of the Pharisees to grasp again the radical nature of this Christ and his message. It seems to me that allowing the situation to be portrayed and in more of its true cultural and intellectual complexity makes the statement and the miracles of Christ even more amazing. In allowing the Pharisees no room for this pretty natural intellectual struggle it is easy to treat the question of all of us rather simplistically. I accept quite fully that (A) we don't fully know and won't know in this life, why Jesus mixed spit and mud and put this compote on the blind man's eyes and (B) quite frankly I don't know how Christ made the blind man see—or how He makes any of us "see," but this for me does not negate the place of the need for questioning. Just as the law plays a part in the spiritual journey, so it seems to me, does intellectual inquiry. As we ask questions, we become again even more profound. I know you to be a questioning, thoughtful person, and I realize we can get stuck here, but the questioning is important and to allow this idea to breathe in you story could have conveyed

an even richer point. Thanks for hearing me.]¹ [The lack of rehearsal. This, however, is a relative comment. John, you are far and away my preferred presenter at this church. I have heard you do better and this is the basis of my comment.] Still some staccato gestures. [The spitting thing was novel and a bit arresting—that's the plus. The down side is that it conjures up an image that's a bit repulsive for some. But you did get an interesting response from that passage. I would hunch that it was tempting, given the response, to play it up beyond its crucialness to the audience.] Jamil, as the blind man's name, appears about twenty minutes into the narrative—could it have appeared earlier? You looked down on the first four words—why not establish eye contact with us from the start?

2. How did the sermon deal with scripture?

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|------|
| A. Faithful to the textual material? | 3.00 |
| B. Emphasis on central theme of text? | 2.86 |
| C. A grace orientation? | 3.37 |
| D. A balanced presentation? | 3.37 |

What points, if any, made the sermon memorable? The opening story. The play between physical and spiritual blindness. The behavior of the healed man. The notion that true sight comes from inside, not a new point but memorable and vitally made. The story of the doctors/minister's meeting—powerfully emotive, even though you took a fairly prosaic approach to the narrative of the meeting. Spit and mud—very “down to earth.” “Came home seeing”—had not noticed that before or thought about the blind man's response to healing in quite as creative way as your story depicted. Chris and you—the intro—took me back to when I was a kid; you had me. You've mentioned your Mom several times in this series—I wish I had known her—thanks for sharing her with us.

What points, if any, made the sermon vital? The behavior of the former blind man. “Faith begins with questions that sound sometimes like doubt”—yes, that's where I am! The opening story. The relevancy of the story to every day experience. Sight as an “inside job”—nicely conveyed. Practical—how to relate to people who suffer. Seeing God's love in a healing act. Good use of Scripture—you use the words from John to finish up your sermon—we don't hear the Word read enough in our worship services; there is a power in the unadorned, unamplified reading and hearing of the words of Scripture.

3. How well did the sermon use the narrative or story format?

- | | |
|--|------|
| A. Movement and progression? | 3.31 |
| B. Plot easy to follow? | 3.50 |
| C. Linkage of Bible story and our stories? | 3.75 |
| D. Integration of preacher's story? | 3.25 |
| E. Connection to your life story? | 3.19 |

What do you think the main idea in the sermon was? In Christ we are free to see beyond! We will not grasp Jesus Christ, not “see” him unless we look with our hearts. Legalism and blindness may be related. Jesus heals eyes and hearts. Some people will not believe in Christ, even in the face of miraculous, incontrovertible evidence. It is easy for conventional wisdom to guide our lives, when what we desperately need is the wisdom

¹Brackets enclose extended comments by a single evaluator.

of God that leads to salvation. When we see with our hearts, we really see. No one is so blind as the one who refuses to see what's right in front of them. Grace, healing, sight and insight.

What did the sermon mean to you personally? God's grace is synonymous with healing. [The path of the heart becomes not just one path to consider in my spiritual walk, but THE path—this is at once the easiest and most difficult challenge in my spiritual life. Following the path of the heart requires that we make choices which may seem quite radical in an externally driven world.] I was compelled to look at my own way of “seeing” God and others. Reminded once again of God's grace—he doesn't let prejudice and blindness of any sort serve as an obstacle of his grace. Made me wonder what Jesus would heal first for me were he standing physically in front of me today—lots of places to begin. A good story, but I had trouble identifying personally with it.

5. **Evaluate organization of the sermon and appropriateness of time usage for the story being told.** In terms of organization, I thought I heard a combination of chronological and topical arrangement—that didn't offer any dissonance for me—I usually need an organization pattern that's more evident as the topic unfolds. Well done! Could have been five minutes shorter, but overall time usage really fine. No problem! Excellent, thoughtful. [Generally the rate is good, especially as you progressed. You traveled on occasion at more than 200 words per minute. Good. We can listen at 500-700 words per minute.]
6. **What did you experience as a result of listening to this sermon? (e.g.: faith, hope, love, God's presence, conviction, guilt, forgiveness, grace, insight, motivation, etc?)** God's presence! A reaffirmation that the heart “knows,” long before the brain, what is true. Healing. I have some rethinking to do and some “seeing” to do. Can't really say that I experienced much—the story didn't connect with me, even though some of your asides did. A determination to listen to the language of the heart more—it's easy to overlook in an academic environment. A new picture of Jesus, who loves, heals and reassures those who need Him. Thanks for sharing this story in such an alive, fresh and personal way. Questions—but those are okay, I guess. Laughter, holy laughter—what a hoot, seeing Jamil playing tricks on his friends, who, like you and your friends did to Chris, no doubt, played lots of tricks on him. I see myself in several of this story's characters.
7. **How can the preacher and the sermon improve?** There was a tendency to treat some aspects of the dilemma a little simplistically. You used some clichés you could have done without—e.g., “blind as a bat” and “dead as a doornail.” Sermon content generally strong and well assembled—John, spend more time on specific rehearsal of delivery and word choice. Nothing to add to a good sermon. Would it be useful to step out and free yourself of the desk on occasion, as for a complete story or a unit of rhetoric, for example? The occasional reference back to Chris was useful. I felt I needed, though, some bridging, some short transitions, there and other places.

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V I T A

John C. Cress was born in 1953 in High Point, North Carolina, U.S.A., and spent his childhood and high-school years in Florida. Following high school he served as a volunteer assistant pastor in Tallahassee, Florida, and, along with another student volunteer, planted a church in Homosassa, Florida, which continues today as an active congregation. After graduating with a B.A. degree in History and Religion from Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee, in 1977, he attended the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, earning a M.Div. Degree in 1980. He entered pastoral ministry in October of 1979, serving for six months as an intern in Phoenix, Arizona. He has pastored continuously since commencement of his internship and was ordained to the gospel ministry in 1983. His ministry assignments have included service as a district pastor in Northern Arizona, a campus minister at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona, and, since September of 1984, a member of the Walla Walla College Church pastoral staff in College Place, Washington. During his tenure on the staff of the Walla Walla College Church he has served as an associate pastor for youth and family ministries and, since January of 1988, as campus chaplain to the academic community of Walla Walla College. He and Pamela (Keele) Cress have been married since 1977 and have two daughters, Jana and Jaci.