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RECURRING CHARACTERS AS BENEFITS IN APPLYING GOD'S WORD

A Major Applied Project
Presented to the Faculty of
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Practical Theology
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

By
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November 2016

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In loving memory of my mother

PAMELA ROSE HAHN

who had hoped to see the completion of this project and
whose love and encouragement continue to shape my life.

In deepest thanks to the people of

IMMANUEL LUTHERAN CHURCH
SEBEWAING, MICHIGAN

&

ST. JOHN'S LUTHERAN CHURCH
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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this project was to evaluate the effectiveness of recurring characters in sermon stories as tools for connecting hearers to Biblical concepts. The report tells the story of a six-week series of sermons which were developed for St. John's Lutheran Church in Millvale, Pennsylvania. The project aimed to determine if the two contemporary characters, created for this series, would become increasingly beneficial over time as hearers became more familiar with them. The report explains the rationale behind the project and its place within the greater field of narrative preaching. It speaks about character creation and storytelling and relates the reception among the hearers. Since stories are widely used in sermons, this project may interest pastors developing a similar serialized story approach in their preaching.

The primary component of this study was the series of six storied sermons which were prepared and delivered by the researcher. The subjects in this study were asked to evaluate their hearing experience using criteria that measured their identification with the characters and any resulting connection to the Biblical themes under consideration. The study suggests that recurring characters provide significant benefit to hearers in applying Biblical truths to their lives.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROJECT INTRODUCED

The Problem

Two thousand years ago, on the Day of Pentecost, the risen and ascended Savior poured out His Holy Spirit upon His chosen disciples. By the working of that Spirit, in the disciples and in the ears of those who heard their words, the men and women gathered in Jerusalem that day rejoiced that each of them could hear the Apostles speaking “in his own native language” (Acts 2:8).¹

The miracle described by those words involved a literal translation of God’s Word from one human language into another – a miracle that took place in the ears of the hearers. But that same phrase can serve well to describe the challenge of proclaiming the Word of God in this present age, indeed in any age. How do we communicate the Spirit-filled Word of God in such a way that people today will hear it, each of them, “in his own native language”?

The people of St. John’s, Millvale, Pennsylvania do not face a language barrier in hearing God’s Word. With the exception of a few infants, all of those present on a typical Sunday morning are fluent English speakers. But if there is not a barrier of language, there are barriers of culture, experience, and biblical knowledge that impede the ability of God’s people to apply His Word to their own lives in this contemporary context.

Charles H. Cosgrove and W. Dow Edgerton write that in the past certain familiar texts of

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version, Crossway Bibles, 2001.

the Bible had come to serve as “icons” by which Christians were able enter into an experience of the divine. However, they observe, as familiarity, even with the most well-known texts begins to fade, those portals are beginning to close.

As fewer and fewer listeners come with a strong prior relationship with Scripture, however, we also find that what may have functioned as an icon at one time may now be heard as little more than *vaguely familiar religious language*. The texts may be recognized as Scripture but have (at best) only a formal authority in principle but not in the hearer’s life.²

While the emphasis of the authors in the above is chiefly about the perceived authority of Scripture, it is interesting to note how they have used the metaphor of “language” to highlight the issue. They are indicating that in some ways the Word of God has become a foreign language, or at least an unfamiliar language, to many people today and that this unfamiliarity has a direct bearing upon the connection of that Word to “the hearer’s life.”

The Holy Scriptures are indeed the living and eternal Word of God, but they are also a collection of ancient books written in times and cultures that can seem far removed from our own. Millvale, Pennsylvania, immediately adjacent to the city of Pittsburgh, is nearly 2,000 years and 6,000 miles removed from the events of the first Pentecost. Our language, our customs, and our lifestyle, are very different from those of the Apostles and their first audience. Those hearing the Word of God today often struggle to make connections between the Biblical revelation and their own personal lives. They ask, “What do the readings we hear in church have to do with the things that are happening in my life?” and “How does God’s Word have relevance for me today?”

When I step into the pulpit these days I have the sense that for many of those listening this

² Charles H. Cosgrove and W. Dow Edgerton. *In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 27. Emphasis mine.

will be their only meaningful encounter with the Word of God for at least seven days. What I give them will have to have an impact; it will have to last. This feeling gives urgency to my preaching and my preparation. It presses me to share the Word of God in a way that will “connect” with them – in a way that it can be readily applied to people’s lives today.

The homiletical task in this and every generation is to proclaim the Spirit-breathed Word of Christ in such a way that it not only captures the attention, but that it “speaks the language” of those who hear. That is to say, the Word must be preached in a way that it can be readily applied³ by its audience. It is my desire to help the people of St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in Millvale, Pennsylvania to better apply the Word of God to their contemporary lives.

The Purpose

This Major Applied Project (MAP) was designed to assist the people of St. John’s in more fully and more faithfully connecting the proclaimed Word of God to their own lives and context through the introduction of recurring characters in my sermons.

Richard Lischer writes, “The point of narrative preaching is not to reconstruct the past but to celebrate what is alive in it and play it forward in ever-changing settings.”⁴ Making use of the power of stories to engage listeners, I sought to introduce two recurring characters in a contemporary setting who would serve to connect God’s Word to a similarly contemporary

³ The term “applied” touches upon the principal goal of this MAP. It indicates not just that the Word should be proclaimed in a way that is intellectually accessible to the congregation but that it should be useable by them – that it should have an evident connection to our common human experience. In this case to “apply” the preached Word is the ability to see how that Word relates to one’s own life and to have the ability, by the Holy Spirit, to integrate that Word (its thoughts, values, and actions) into one’s daily life. To “apply” the Word is to “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” that Word in such a way that it shapes the hearers in their lives and callings as disciples of Jesus Christ. Terms such as “appropriate” and “connect” are used in this paper with similar emphasis and meaning.

⁴ Lischer, Richard. *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 114.

audience.

During a series of six sermons. I intended that the congregation's growing identification with these characters would aid them in making connections between the Biblical text and their own personal contexts. It was my desire that the characters should serve as "windows" through which members of St. John's could see how particular Bible readings and themes intersected with their own daily lives in meaningful ways.

The research I conducted aimed to determine if the two characters developed would, in fact, serve as significant aids to the members of St. John's in appropriating the Word of God. I was especially curious to determine if the congregation's growing familiarity with the characters, as they listened to the series over a period of time, would provide an increasingly positive impact in that process of applying God's Word.

To best accomplish my purposes, my preliminary research focused on storytelling and story craft. I gave particular attention to ideas for creating likeable and memorable characters, since that was essential in meeting my homiletical goals. In this regard I drew significantly from Lawrence Block, a popular author whose story craft and character creations I have come to admire.⁵ Another component of my early research looked at how to form a sermon series in which my characters would be presented to the congregation.

Since the Word of God was central to this endeavor, it was imperative that significant time be spent in crafting the sermons themselves. If my purpose was to aid the people of St. John's in applying God's Word, the messages were, of necessity, to be faithful to that Word. In addition, the stories needed to be faithful to the characters, so that their embodiment of the theological

⁵ Lawrence Block was named a Grand Master by the Mystery Writers of America in 1994. In addition to being a prolific author of crime and mystery stories, he has penned eight books for aspiring authors who are honing their craft.

content in the sermon would seem “true to life.”

After writing and delivering the series of sermons, my research assessed the outcome within the congregation. Would the people perceive that these two characters were of value to them in connecting the Good News of Jesus Christ to their lives?

I expected that final assessment to reveal that a small minority of my respondents would react negatively to my approach; not everyone finds value in narrative. However, I expected the great majority to react positively, even expressing a desire for the now familiar characters to make continued appearances in my sermons.

I further anticipated that a majority would indicate a growing appreciation for the two characters as they came to know them over time, and would find themselves identifying in some way with at least one of the characters. Most significantly, I expected that many participants would be able to identify instances where the words and activities of the characters helped them to see how the text under consideration had bearing upon their personal life. Their ability to connect God’s Word to their own lives would be a key measure of my success.

The Process

After doing research into character development, I crafted a biographical sketch for each of my two contemporary characters who were to appear in the series of sermons. These documents were for my reference during the sermon writing process.⁶ Having an established backstory for my characters was to help me be consistent in depicting them and to inform the sermon stories over time. Most importantly, having an established baseline for my characters would help me to frame how they might interact with each week’s sermon theme.

⁶ These character sketches can be found in Appendix E.

Second, I sought to develop a sermon series that could be presented over six consecutive Sundays. It was important to me that this series be in harmony with the themes of the Church Year even if I chose not to preach on the appointed texts that were being read on those Sundays. Designing this sermon series would require exploring the lectionary, as well as the congregational calendar, in order to designate an appropriate time and to plan the theme and Bible text for each sermon in the series. During this process of designing the series I remained mindful that in presenting my two characters I wanted one or both of them to experience some kind of spiritual or personal growth over the six week period. It was hoped that this growth would exemplify and encourage the same in my hearers.

Tools were needed to evaluate my efforts. Response cards were used by the congregation on the Sundays during the sermon series. These were available immediately after each service and sought to gauge the general impression of the congregation and any benefit they might perceive from this approach. Here I was interested to see the overall response to the characters and any change in that response that manifested over the course of the series. I also desired to see what indicators were present in how this approach was valuable to the hearers as a way of connecting the Biblical text to their lives.

Some initial consideration was given to providing a similar response tool to those who listen to my sermons online but after due consideration this was not done. A large number of our online visitors are from out of state. Since this MAP was being specifically designed to benefit the people of St. John's in Millvale, Pennsylvania, the inclusion of online respondents may have damaged the integrity of the research.

In addition to the more general information I looked to receive from the response cards, I selected a small number of volunteers who could provide additional, and more comprehensive,

feedback. I asked eight individuals who were in regular Sunday attendance, since these would be the most likely to hear the entire series and because they also had a baseline experience with hearing my “regular” sermons. I sought to have some diversity in the group in gender, age, and longevity in the congregation. I would look to this small group of individuals to complete a more detailed response form at the midpoint of the sermon presentations and then to participate in a structured one-on-one conversation about the series at its conclusion.⁷ Their evaluation of this kind of homiletic approach and their perceptions of its value for applying the Word of God to their lives would provide significant data for evaluating the project.

Finally, when the response cards were collected and the interviews conducted, the results were tabulated. The cards had a scored response that allowed for easy graphing of the responses to each question from week to week. These response cards would help indicate a growing appreciation for my recurring characters as time progressed. The response cards also allowed comparisons across questions, for example, if someone said they identified with a particular character we can determine if it was more likely for them to say they found value in that week’s story for their own personal life.

Summarizing the responses of the small group respondents was more complex but also provided more precise detail about what worked and what did not. In general, the group’s responses to the mid-point questionnaire were not as helpful as was desired. It was hoped that their mid-point answers would provide a foil against which to evaluate their responses to the final interview but most of the responses were brief and lacked detail. The final interviews with this group, however, were extremely helpful in putting some flesh on the skeleton of answers that the response cards provided. Their reflections were used to interpret the data that

⁷ Verbatims of these interviews are included in Appendix G.

were collected, particularly their personal reflections on the success of this research project and its potential for future implementation.

The Parameters

This project assumes the effectiveness of narrative as a homiletical tool in general. The testimony of research, experience, and the example of Scripture itself cannot be refuted.⁸ This study instead aims to assess a very specific application of narrative in my particular context of ministry – character development over time.

This project also presupposes the infallibility and authority of the Holy Scriptures and the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church which is drawn from them. Further, the efficaciousness of the Word to create and grow faith is the work of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace. So all glory and credit for whatever spiritual growth and good resulted from this project belongs solely to the Divine Author who works powerfully through His Word.

That being said, this project also recognizes the responsibility of the human preacher of God’s Word to communicate effectively, that is in an understandable and memorable way, so that hearers are aided in applying God’s Word to their lives. Glenn Nielsen describes the preacher as having “penultimate responsibility” (the Holy Spirit having the ultimate responsibility) for his use of God’s means of grace. “The pastor’s stewardship of the Word is at issue. How will he handle this precious message so that people are able to give ear to it, experience it properly, and carry it into the days that follow?”⁹ This project seeks to evaluate one

⁸ The Lord’s use of stories in His preaching ministry is well known. The contemporary use of storytelling and “narrative” in preaching has been the focus of much interest. Chapters Two and Three will explore some of what has been written, including scientific research which affirms the value and power of stories in human community.

⁹ Glenn Nielsen, “No Longer Dinosaurs: Relating Lutheran Homiletics and Communication Practice,” *Concordia Journal* 25, no. 1 (January 1999): 27.

homiletical tool that falls under the preacher's stewardship of the Divine Word for the wellbeing of those who hear.

Although it will be possible to make reasonable extrapolations from the data that has been gathered from this project, the scope in which definitive statements about this data can be made is narrow indeed. Concerning these particular characters within this particular setting and given the theme and purpose of this particular sermon series we can say much. We can say with some certainty how the sermons and characters were received and in what ways they accomplished what was desired of them. To inquire whether these recurring characters might have value for my future preaching at St. John's can also be answered with reasonable confidence. But to ask more broadly whether the use of recurring characters has value to preaching in the greater Church is something at which we can only make a reasoned and educated conjecture. But some recommendations can be made.

A Preview of the Structure

The structural flow of this MAP begins with the theological basis of the project and its historical context. In Chapter Two I will explore the nature and purpose of evangelical proclamation within a Lutheran homiletic. In addition I will reflect on Biblical examples of storytelling and their implications for how story can both embody and exemplify our life in Christ.

Chapter Three will review some of the current thought related to sermon stories and observations concerning how recurring characters have been used in the life of the Church. This chapter will also review salient scientific research concerning the value of storytelling.

Chapter Four will tell the story of my project. It will unfold the design and implementation of my research, including the development of research tools and my rationale for making various

choices that would ultimately impact the process and the outcome of my research. This chapter will detail my experiences during the sermon presentations and the interviews that followed.

Chapter Five will provide my evaluation of this project. I have posited that recurring contemporary characters in my sermons would benefit the people of St. John's Lutheran Church in applying the Word of God to their lives. A thorough review of the information provided on the congregational response cards will provide data to assess the effectiveness of the sermons. Also this chapter will include a major assessment of my success in light of the midpoint questionnaires and endpoint interviews that I conducted. I will draw conclusions from these and correlate this qualitative data with the information collected from the response cards.

Chapter Six will reflect on the benefit and potential benefit of my research. I will first share the experience of St. John's as a congregation participating in this event and the experience of those individuals who played a special role in this project. I will share my personal experiences in the conduct of this research and how this project was beneficial for my growth as a pastor, a preacher, and person. Finally I will indicate where things will go from here, including implications for my future ministry and opportunities for further research in the area of my study.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PROJECT IN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

Each Sunday, on the memorial day of our Lord's resurrection from the dead, the people of St. John's Lutheran Church gather at 501 North Avenue in Millvale, Pennsylvania to hear the life-giving Word of God. They come because God has called them by name in Holy Baptism. They come because God has promised to strengthen and renew them by His own gifts – His Sacrament and His Word.

I have been called by God through St. John's congregation to administer the Sacraments and to preach the Word. It is a task I face with reverent awe, and I pray, holy joy. The project I report in these pages is specifically in connection with my calling to preach the Word. In this chapter I will identify some of the theological foundations upon which this work stands. The specific theological loci that facilitated this project included:

A Lutheran Homiletic

Since this MAP aimed to embody a truly Lutheran homiletic, it follows that some reflection on the nature of a Lutheran homiletic is in order. What makes for a truly Lutheran sermon? An unthoughtful answer might be that any sermon preached in a Lutheran congregation or by a Lutheran pastor is by definition a "Lutheran" sermon. But my question aims at a more thoughtful response. It seeks to define the boundaries and essential qualities of such a sermon. It uses the term "Lutheran" reverentially to denote a biblically orthodox proclamation that reflects the best practices of the homiletic craft. The following statements, in no particular order, identify

my own understanding of the hallmarks of evangelical proclamation in the Lutheran tradition.

Biblical

Lutheran preaching is Bible-based preaching. In 1932, when The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod reaffirmed its historic stance on the infallibility of the Holy Scriptures in the *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod*, it definitively connected those Scriptures to the preaching of the Church. A portion of the Statement’s first article reads, “The Holy Scriptures are the sole source from which all doctrines *proclaimed* in the Christian Church must be taken and therefore, too, the sole rule and norm by which all teachers and doctrines much be examined and judged.”¹ To claim an allegiance to the authority of Holy Scripture and untether the proclamation of the church from the content of Scripture would have been a non sequitur; one naturally follows upon the other. Whether the sermon is textual, topical, or thematic, the doctrinal and teaching content of a truly Lutheran sermon will have its origin in the revealed Word of God. The “goods” that the sermon aims to deliver will be only those which are faithful to the Bible and rooted in the same.

Diligence will be exercised by the preacher of a Lutheran sermon so that not only will the main thrust of his preaching be in accord with the Biblical truth, leading his hearers to Christ and His salvation by grace, but the sermon will be faithful to God’s revealed truth in all its particulars. Consequently, it will demonstrate fidelity to the teachings of the Bible as they are rightly expounded by the Lutheran Confessions. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “We are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ” (2 Cor. 2:17).

¹ *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1932), 2. Emphasis mine.

Evangelical

If a sermon is Bible-based it will also by definition be Christ-centered, since Jesus Christ and His redemptive work are the focal point of all Holy Scripture. In the fifth chapter of John, Jesus says, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about Me” (John 5:39). Again in Luke, Christ opens the minds of the disciples to understand that the Scriptural witness is centered upon His own death and resurrection for the salvation of the world (Luke 24:44–47).² Hence, truly Lutheran preaching, being biblical preaching, will necessarily bear witness to the person and salvific work of Jesus Christ. That is to say it will proclaim the Gospel.

Lutherans have made a maxim of those words which are traditionally attributed to Luther, “*justificatio est articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*,” “justification is the article by which the Church stands or falls.” The justification of the sinner before God by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ and apart from any work or merit on our part is the very essence of the Gospel.³ Any sermon that does not preach this Gospel not only fails to be Lutheran, it fails even to be Christian. As Martin Luther wrote in 1530, “This doctrine is the head and the cornerstone. It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God; and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour.”⁴

To say that Lutheran preaching is Gospel preaching is not to say that the doctrine of justification will be the central topic of every sermon. It indicates that this central doctrine will

² See also: Luke 24:27 and Acts 8:35.

³ This is the doctrine detailed in Article IV of the Augsburg Confession and its Apology. See, Theodore Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959) 30, 107–68.

⁴ Ewald M. Plass, ed. *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian*. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 704.

inform the hermeneutical approach of the preacher, shape the spirit of his communication, and be evidenced finally in the content of the sermon, i.e. the sermon will in some way proclaim the saving Good News.

Likewise, to say that Lutheran preaching is Gospel preaching is not to say that a Lutheran sermon will omit the Law. Far from it! As Luther admonished Dr. Güttel, “Preach that sinners must be roused to repentance not only by the sweet grace and suffering of Christ, by the message that He died for us, but also by the terrors of the law.”⁵ The Law of God is to be preached in its power and severity, to accuse and even to teach, but only the Gospel will be presented to save and deliver the sinner. A Lutheran sermon, “rightly dividing the Word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:25 KJV) will distinguish Law and Gospel in such a way that God’s salvation, fully and freely accomplished in Christ, will come to the fore. As C.F.W. Walther said, “If you wish to be an orthodox teacher, you must also rightly distinguish Law and Gospel.”⁶

Proclamatory

Lutheran preaching is proclamatory preaching. The Scriptures do not just inform the content of preaching. They also exhibit the performative power of the Word of God. Gerhard Forde used the word “proclamation” to indicate that preaching is not merely an act of informing but more a word of “doing.” Forde writes, “Proclamation is present tense: I here and now give the gift to you, Christ Himself...”⁷

This idea that preaching not only points to Christ but also delivers Christ together with His gifts is consistent with the nature of God’s Word. God speaks and it is done. God’s Word does

⁵ Martin Luther, “Against the Antinomians,” Franklin Sherman, ed., Helmut T. Lehmann, gen. ed., *Luther’s Works, Vol. 47: The Christians in Society IV*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 111.

⁶ C.F.W. Walther, *Law & Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2010), 37.

⁷ Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 2.

not just describe the Gospel, it also does the Gospel, setting sinners free. This dynamic quality of the Word gives expression to the Lutheran understanding of God's Word as a Means of Grace⁸ which gives the forgiveness of sins. To say that a truly Lutheran sermon is proclamatory is simply to say that it will "give" Christ; impart forgiveness; set convicted sinners free; "do" the Gospel.

Luther understood this proclamatory task of preaching very well. He understood that preaching was a living word of life hurled into a dungeon of death. Preaching didn't talk about help. Preaching is help! Fred W. Meuser writes of Luther's understanding of preaching: "Through the spoken word the power and victory of Christ invade life today. Preaching is therefore not only about the saving acts of God. The sermon itself is a saving event."⁹

Lastly, by way of clarification, identifying Lutheran preaching as proclamatory is not to mandate any particular form or style for preaching. A sermon might be propositional, narrative, conversational, or something else, and its reasoning might work inductively or deductively. But whatever the form, to say that a Lutheran sermon will "proclaim" indicates a confidence that God is at work in the sermon to accomplish His own purposes by His Word in the life and faith of those who hear.¹⁰

Contextual

Lutheran preaching is preaching in context. Every sermon has a particular set of listeners, a distinct time, and place. A Lutheran sermon will demonstrate an awareness of those things in order to communicate effectively.

In most cases the listeners of the sermon will be a congregation comprised largely of God's

⁸ We might even say that it is the chief Means of Grace, since the Sacraments and Holy Absolution derive their effective power from the Word and do not exist apart from it.

⁹ Richard A. Jensen, *Thinking in Story: Preaching in a Post-literate Age* (Lima, OH: CSS, 1993), 71.

¹⁰ See Isa. 55.

baptized children. Although preaching is always missional, we do not speak to the Christian congregation as to unbelievers who must be convinced or cajoled into the faith. As William H. Willimon writes, “Baptismal preaching is not so much a matter of being didactic, of explaining something, as it is of testifying to something, struggling to describe an event that has already happened to the congregation, bringing into view the significance of our baptism with words.”¹¹

Being aware of the congregation’s identity in Christ, as God’s new creations¹², will certainly coincide with an awareness that the old sinful nature remains and clings to us all the way to the grave. God’s people are both saints and sinners. But an awareness of the hearers involves more than just a theological understanding of their identity, it also includes being aware of the needs and sensitivities of individuals that are present in the worshipping congregation. The more the preacher is in touch with the history of those assembled and the more connected he is with the individual needs and concerns of his hearers, the more effectively he will communicate God’s message to them.

Beyond understanding the hearers, Lutheran preaching will incorporate an awareness of the occasion. Events in the life of the congregation and major news events unfolding in the nation and world may require appropriate reflection in the day’s homily. An awareness of the liturgical context likewise is needed. Philippians 2:5–11 is the appointed epistle reading for the Sunday of the Passion (Palm Sunday), and Series A of the three-year lectionary allows the same text to be read once more in the fall.¹³ A sermon preached on that text at the beginning of Holy Week will probably be crafted differently than one that is preached on that same text when it’s closer to St. Michael’s Day.

¹¹ William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 5.

¹² See 2 Cor. 5:17.

¹³ *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), xiv, xv.

The sermons in my MAP were preached during the last Sundays of one Church Year and the four Sundays of Advent at the beginning of the next. Although the end and beginning of the Church Year have crossover themes concerning the Lord's coming, there is a distinct change in emphasis as the calendar brings us closer to Christmas, a change evident not only in the texts but in the atmosphere of the hearers. In at least some subtle ways that change in emphasis was to be acknowledged in the sermon stories that I was telling.

A preacher's evident awareness of people, place, and time will make it less likely that a sermon will be heard as a generic or even disembodied¹⁴ communication and more likely that it will be heard by the hearers as a Word of God for them and for then.

Artistic

Lutheran preaching is a work of art. Preaching is the work of God the Holy Spirit who gives gifts to His people. Faithful pastors, studying God's Spirit-breathed Word and praying for the Lord's guidance, will employ the skills God has given them, including theological, intellectual, and emotional skills, in order to artfully present God's dynamic and life-giving Word to those who hear.¹⁵

In sermon creation, pastors make decisions about many things, including: which portion of a text to emphasize; which stories and illustrations to include; which ideas to leave unused; and the desired ordering of the material to be presented. These decisions amount to an artful task in which choices are made to better communicate the message. The art of preaching seeks a form of communication that is both faithful and effective for the context.

¹⁴ See also the final portion of this chapter called, "Embodiment of Life and Faith."

¹⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor has called preaching "alchemy," an event in which "tin becomes gold and yard rocks become diamonds under the influence of the Holy Spirit." Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Lanham, MA: Cowley, 1993), 91.

In an article titled, “The Tapestry of Preaching,” David Schmitt describes the artful nature of sermon craft. He identifies four components of a sermon (textual exposition; theological confession; evangelical proclamation; and hearer interpretation) and describes how each plays a role in sermon formation as the preacher creatively weaves them together. He writes,

Faithful preaching is an art: the pastor weaves together four threads of discourse to form a sermon that is based on a text of Scripture, centered in the death and resurrection of Christ for the forgiveness of sins, for the benefit of the hearers in faith and life. These four threads work together to form the event of the sermon. They are not always found in the same proportion or communicated in the same manner. At certain times with certain texts and certain people, certain threads tend to predominate. Yet they are all present, and it is through the artful interweaving of these four that the preacher faithfully serves God in the office of preaching.¹⁶

A truly Lutheran sermon is Bible-based; it presents the Gospel; it proclaims or “does” the good news of Jesus Christ; it reflects an awareness of its context; and it involves Spirit-driven artistry in its composition. These are the hallmarks that inform my understanding of Lutheran preaching and which, I pray, are evident in the result.

Biblical Precedents for Storytelling

Richard Eslinger argues, “The way towards renewal of preaching is to be found in the recovery of storytelling.”¹⁷ The sermons included in my MAP are not conventional Lutheran sermons in that they are story sermons; the interaction between my two characters is the central event of each sermon in the six part series. It seems important, therefore, to demonstrate that this approach springs from biblical precedent.¹⁸

¹⁶ David Schmitt, “The Tapestry of Preaching,” *Concordia Journal* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 153.

¹⁷ Richard L. Eslinger, *A New Hearing: Living Options in Homiletic Method* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 17.

¹⁸ A brief survey of examples in extra-biblical history can be found in the next chapter.

The Old Testament

Because it is history, much of the Old Testament comes to us in narrative form. Beginning from the creation of the world, it tells the story of God and His people. Even more, the New Testament tells us that the events recorded in the Old are not just history, but they are stories that convey meaning for us today, stories which were recorded for just that purpose. Paul, warning the Corinthian congregation against their attempt to honor both Christ and idols, points them to the story of ancient Israel in its wilderness wandering. He writes, “These things took place as examples *for us*, that we might not desire evil as they did” (1 Cor. 10:6).¹⁹ In like manner he says to the Romans, “Whatever was written in former days was written for *our* instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).²⁰

Thus the New Testament receives the stories of the Old Testament not just as histories but as having sermonic value for us. In doing so, not only the content but also the storied form in which the content is given is tacitly acknowledged as useful.

The Old Testament stories come to us not simply as morality plays but they function as tools for critical reflection upon our own lives. The actions and words of historical persons are recorded for us, but often without comment on the merit of the words, actions, and events that are related. This does not suggest that the Scriptures which relate these events have no value judgment to make concerning these things. Rather, these historical narratives are placed in the context of God’s revealed Law and His Promise to send the Messiah. In that light, readers of the text are invited to critically evaluate the stories they hear and to have those stories then shape

¹⁹ Emphasis mine. See also 1 Cor. 9:10a.

²⁰ Emphasis mine.

their understanding of their own lives and of the world in which they live. Thomas Long writes how stories make claims that invite our critical reflection and cause us to reevaluate our lives and understanding.

We each have stories by which we define our identity and shape our life. Each new story we encounter is placed alongside the old stories for our comparison. Sometimes the new story confirms our world view, but on other occasions it challenges that world – and we must choose in which world we will live.²¹

An additional dimension to the teaching stories of Israel’s history which has bearing upon my MAP is the dynamic of recurring characters. The characters of my project were designed to connect with people, at least in part, through their growing familiarity as they appeared over and again. Among the many stories recorded “for us” in the Old Testament are those that likewise present the ongoing exploits of familiar characters, individuals whom we come to know and identify with as we encounter them in multiple stories. To look at just one example, take David.

As we follow the exploits of David, the shepherd king of Israel, we witness his life from youth to old age. We become familiar with his great strengths and devastating flaws. Through his walk with the Lord we gain wisdom for our own walk with God. In addition, our growing familiarity with David includes seeing repeated themes in his lifetime: David’s triumphs (defeating Goliath and the Philistines); David’s failings (the incidents with Bathsheba and Absalom); David’s mercy (shown to Saul, Mephibosheth, and to his enemies); David’s faith (evidenced in song, sacrifice, and prayer). Most of all we see the Lord at work in the life of this man who is as sinful and imperfect as we are, and through his story we come to know better the faithfulness of God in our own lives. Again this narrative experience of growing familiarity with a character is not an incidental aspect of the recorded accounts of David’s life, but is integral to

²¹ Thomas G. Long. *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 76.

the way story functions.

Again, Thomas Long discusses how stories allow us to see ourselves in and through the life of another person. He writes, “The impact of biblical stories is often a result of this dynamic of identification with character. . . . When we identify with a character in a story, whatever happens to that character happens to us at the level of imagination.”²² We may never experience the exact things that David once experienced but in the biblical stories we readily participate in his moral, physical, and spiritual struggles and find parallels to our own lives and circumstances.

Finally, it is important to note that we have a clear Old Testament example of storytelling being used to powerful sermonic effect. After David’s gross sins of adultery and murder, he is confronted by the prophet Nathan who convicts David, or rather leads David to convict himself, by means of a participatory story (2 Samuel 12). In this case the story which is told is not historical in nature, but is a true-to-life story that allows David enter its world with the result that he becomes justly outraged at what proves to be his own sinful behavior. This is the kind of storytelling that Richard Jensen would advocate more of in contemporary preaching. Rather than telling stories that merely illustrate the Law or Gospel, he says, “I propose that we tell stories as metaphors of participation. We tell stories in which the law works to convict a person of sin.”²³ He likewise encourages stories in which people will “experience” the Gospel, rather than it simply being explained.

The New Testament

The New Testament, like the Old, contains stories of an historical nature, stories that not only convey factual events but which illustrate and teach the life of faith. The Acts of the

²² Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms*, 75.

²³ Jensen, *Thinking in Story*, 80.

Apostles, as its name suggests, is replete with such stories. Most importantly, the New Testament tells the true stories of Christ's life, death, and resurrection for our salvation. These are the stories which inform our understanding of all other stories in the Scriptures and beyond and which are redemptive in their very telling.

However, it is the Lord's own use of story in His preaching and teaching which significantly argues for the use of story in the preaching of the Church. Christ's use of simple stories to both illumine and obfuscate is one of the most familiar aspects of His earthly ministry. It is a homiletical tool which the Savior put to regular use. Matthew 13:3 says, "He told them many things in parables."

A parable has been described as "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning" and something which "defines the unknown by using the known,"²⁴ but whatever pithy way one might define a parable, it is clear that the simple stories of Jesus are not simple at all; they are deceptively deep and powerful. They connect us to the reality of Christ and His Kingdom. They are the examples *par excellence* of the innate power of story to connect God's truth to human life.

Perhaps one of the most deceptively powerful things about the Lord's parables is how ordinary they appear. Christ's parables are snapshots of everyday human experience. They are not filled with mythical creatures. But they are almost always set in familiar earthly environs which the people in Jesus' times would have known and experienced. "Parables are not fairy tales. They are concrete stories that use the secular world to communicate spiritual truths."²⁵ Yet for all their apparent ordinariness, Christ's parables are surprisingly subversive, catching the

²⁴ Don Schwager, "What is a Parable?" <http://www.rc.net/wcc/parable1.htm>, accessed June 28, 2016.

²⁵ Jeffrey D. Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety: How to Re-create the Dynamics of Biblical Genres* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 106.

hearer off guard by new understandings.²⁶

The stories I have created for my MAP are intentionally ordinary, placed in the contemporary setting of a nursing home, a venue which is familiar to many. Yet that intentionally ordinary quality was meant to lift my hearers to the extraordinary, to an encounter with Christ and His redemptive love.

My MAP specifically probes the value of using recurring characters in preaching. As we look at the Lord's use of parables, it would be improper to describe Him as using that technique. However, it is worth noting Christ's repeated use of familiar types of characters in His stories: a shepherd; a king; a bridegroom; a father. For those who regularly listen to Jesus' words, these become well-known "stock characters" whose familiarity makes them welcomed guests in our hearing as they open God's truth to us.

Finally, Christ's use of parables does more than sanction the use of stories in Christian preaching, it suggests something about the way those stories are designed to work in those who hear. Jeffery Arthurs writes, "Parables often achieve their effects inductively and subtly. Sometimes Jesus left his stories open-ended, and if we would preach like Jesus, at times we'll do the same."²⁷ Jesus' parables were meant to sit with people, to work on them from the inside, leading them to make some of connections for themselves. Even in those times when Christ explained the meaning of His parables privately to the disciples, there were things He did not explain. I also have left some parts of my sermon stories open-ended. I did this not only because this seemed more "true-to-life," but in order to engage my hearers in thinking about the story and about the choices and experiences of my characters.

²⁶ For example a Samaritan is made the hero in the familiar parable of Luke 10. This was contrary to all expectation and was likely upsetting to many who did not wish to entertain flattering thoughts about that race.

²⁷ Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*, 122.

Embodiment of Life and Faith

In Jesus, God has come among us in a way that is accessible to us. He comes to us bearing our humanity that we might know Him and have relationship with Him. As our congregation's namesake, St. John, writes, "[that] which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands...that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you" (1 John 1:1, 3).

To develop complex characters for use in a sermon series is an exercise in incarnational theology, an attempt to embody our human condition and the saving promises of God in a way that makes them accessible, even practical, for the hearer. In likeness to Christ, the God in our flesh, my characters were meant to make the intangible, tangible. And the stories I told with my characters are lengthy. They were meant to provide an opportunity for my hearers to be caught up in their world.

Glenn Nielsen describes the power of this kind of storied embodiment and its ability to help people make connections with their own faith and life in a journal article titled, "No Longer Dinosaurs."

A well-told narrative will capture attention and pull the hearers into the plot, characters, action, and setting. They can bring people into the experience of the sermon's message; they elicit a present tense involvement in the story. True, there are disadvantages to the use of such extensive narratives, but the longer metaphor of participation – a story that contains plot, action, characters, and direction – is certainly one communicative strategy that will give expression to the inner subjective experience of people as well as allow them to see how faith plays itself out in the concrete world in which they live.²⁸

From the beginning of this endeavor it was my goal that my characters would present "honest encounters" that would ring true to my hearers. To me that meant the characters and

²⁸ Nielsen, "No Longer Dinosaurs," 27.

their situations would reflect the complexity of Christian life and even tragedy of life in this world. My characters may be fictional but they were designed to bear all the markers of our common humanity; they are always sinful, sometimes noble, sometimes inconsistent, and always unique persons. In crafting both my characters and their stories I have treasured the counsel of

Thomas Long:

Because pulpit storytelling is a dress rehearsal for the living of the Christian life, this means that it is ethically irresponsible to tell the canned and simplistic preacher stories that drain away the moral and theological ambiguities inherent in real life. Preacher stories that always yield the right moral lesson or end up in triumph without struggle are a damned lie about human life and Christian faith. ²⁹

By God's grace, my characters embody a true humanity and become bridges to the truth of God in Jesus Christ.

²⁹ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 20.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PROJECT IN HISTORICAL AND ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

There is a standard set of books that I ordinarily reach for when preparing sermons. The Bible is first among them, including texts in their original languages. Greek or Hebrew helps are on the shelf right behind me. I will occasionally look at trusted commentaries as well. Unless there is some specific historical or factual reference I wish to confirm for use in my sermon, it is exceedingly rare for me to open another book to help me in my preaching.

One of the reasons I applied to the Doctor of Ministry program at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis was to receive a guided reading plan of worthwhile books. I also sought the added motivation of class requirements that would compel me to read those books. My experience in the program was ultimately so much more valuable than that, but it also succeeded in accomplishing those initial goals. My horizons were expanded through the introduction of great writers and insightful teachers. I have found resources for preaching in places previously unconsidered.

This chapter of my MAP gives evidence of a kind of preparation for preaching that was heretofore alien to me. It points to preaching that has been honed not only by leaders in the field of homiletics, but by leaders and scholars in other disciplines as well. As I have learned to reach for more, and different books, in my sermon preparation it has given me increasing competence and, by the Spirit's working, increasing effectiveness.

In the following pages I will detail some of the concepts and research from those books and

teachers which influenced the development and implementation of my MAP. After a brief introduction to narrative preaching, I will share some of the science behind the power of stories and conclude with some of my guiding research in crafting characters and story.

Narrative Preaching

The sermons in my MAP fall comfortably within the borders of what is called the New Homiletic or Narrative Preaching. In 1965 David James Randolph coined the term “New Homiletic” to identify an emerging approach to homiletics which eschewed the propositional nature of the old. Where traditional preaching had followed a modernist reduction of classical rhetoric, sermons of the “new” homiletic were designed to engage the hearer in an experience of the Word. Randolph said, “Preaching is the event in which the biblical text is interpreted in order that its meaning will come to expression in the concrete situation of the hearers.”¹

Perhaps the chief hallmark of the New Homiletic was its turn from deductive reasoning to the inductive. Where traditional sermons had disclosed their points and goals at the outset, sermons of the new approach were designed to lead the hearers in an experience of discovery throughout the course of the sermon. These sermons didn’t always tell stories but they were designed to function like stories, hence the name “Narrative Preaching.”

Fred Craddock indicates that this approach which has been called “new” is not really new at all. It’s as old as humanity. He says, “Inductive movement in preaching corresponds to the way people ordinarily experience reality.”² As the story of our life unfolds we don’t always know where it is going until we have arrived. And he describes the inductively moving sermon

¹ O. Wesley Allen, Jr., ed., *The Renewed Homiletic* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 8. Emphasis mine.

² Fred Craddock, *As One without Authority* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 55.

as “more descriptive than hortatory and more marked by the affirmative than the imperative.”³

One of the most familiar examples of this inductive approach comes from Eugene Lowry. He writes, “A sermon is not a doctrinal lecture. It is an event-in-time, a narrative art form more akin to a play or novel in shape than to a book.”⁴ He calls his sermon design “the homiletical plot,” though others have called it simply, “the Lowry Loop.” In this approach Lowry’s dynamics of “Oops!, Ugh!, Aha!, Whee!, and Yeah!” are not points on a homiletical outline. They describe experiences by the congregation as they encounter God’s Word at work in the biblical text that is unfolded in their hearing.

Another hallmark of the New Homiletic is a renewed focus on the language and genres of the Bible. The old, deductive approach to preaching had resulted in a certain sameness in sermon structure. This sameness belied the great variety of form and language that was present in the Scriptures. Fred Craddock, among others, asked, “Why should the multitude of forms and moods within biblical literature and the multitude of needs in the congregation be brought together in one unvarying mold, and that copied from Greek rhetoricians of centuries ago?”⁵

H. Grady Davis, a forerunner of the New Homiletic, argued for sermons that sprang organically from their biblical texts. In the first sentences of his groundbreaking *Design for Preaching* he writes, “The relation of substance and form in the communication of thought is the kind of relation that exists between living tissue and organism.”⁶ The New Homiletic urged an awareness of the words and style at work in the text and for a manifestation of those things in the sermons that were derived from those texts.

³ Craddock, *Without Authority*, 49.

⁴ Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), xx.

⁵ Craddock, *Without Authority*, 113.

⁶ Davis, H. Grady, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), 1.

Thomas Long also advocates for sermons that work to reflect the genre of their biblical source material.

Preachers who have sought to be open and attentive to biblical texts in their preaching have long sensed that a sermon based upon a psalm, for example, ought somehow to be different from one that grows out of a miracle story, not only because of *what* the two texts say but also because of *how* the texts say what they say.⁷

He argues that the preachers should reflect the “rhetorical impact” inherent in each unique kind of biblical literature. “The preacher’s task...is not to replicate the text but to regenerate the impact of some portion of that text.”⁸

Even as it turned to the language of the text, the New Homiletic brought a similar turn to see the role of the hearers as participants in the sermonic experience. The congregation was not just an audience that gathered to hear lectures on the Bible each Sunday morning. They were fellow pilgrims with the preacher in exploring the meaning of God’s truth for their lives. As such, they were not to be passive listeners to a prepared distillation of the Bible, but active partners in exploring the meaning of the text under consideration. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “The congregation’s job is not simply to accept – or ignore – what a sermon says, but to wrestle with the same passages of Scripture the preacher is wrestling with until God’s word yields its particular blessing for each one of them.”⁹

One aspect of this renewed awareness of the hearers was the aforementioned recognition that Western culture had changed. “The days are long gone when most preachers can stand up in pulpits and name people’s sins for them. They do not have that authority anymore.”¹⁰ Sermons

⁷ Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms*, 11.

⁸ Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms*, 33.

⁹ Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, 74–75.

¹⁰ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2000), 20.

which were still working with a “top down” model would struggle to find a hearing in a time when hearers held every authority as suspect. The new inductive approach was consciously trying to reach hearers “where they were.” But for all its outwardly unthreatening appearance, the new preaching was not to be tame. “Tolerance is there, to be sure, but like all sharing of the gospel, inductive preaching seeks to persuade.”¹¹

In addition, the New Homiletic sought to respect the hearers by regarding them as whole individuals. Sermons were not to be just rational arguments that appealed to the intellect. Sermons were to address whole persons, including their emotions and their life experiences in a broken world. Taylor writes, “In the postmodern age, the language of sin and salvation will only communicate with the disillusioned if it is absolutely truthful about the realities of their lives, and if it supports them to name those realities for themselves.”¹²

Fred Craddock demonstrates this concern for those who hear sermons. He says, “When a person preaches, the method of communication, the movement of the sermon, reflects the hermeneutical principles, the view of the authority of scripture, church, and clergy, *and especially one’s doctrine of humanity.*”¹³ When Craddock writes about the preacher’s “doctrine of humanity” he’s not describing the preacher’s theological understanding of humanity’s sinfulness. He’s talking about how the preacher perceives his hearers and whether he sees them as complex human persons living in the real world. When a preacher addresses his congregation as if they were students in a lecture hall or as robots who need to be programmed with good information he probably isn’t communicating very effectively. He is not only being disrespectful to his hearers, he is demonstrating a failure to understand humanity.

¹¹ Craddock, *Without Authority*, 79.

¹² Taylor, *Speaking of Sin*, 20.

¹³ Craddock, *Without Authority*, 5. Emphasis mine.

A final noteworthy hallmark of Narrative Preaching is its emphasis on the sermon as a performative act. Fred Craddock writes, “Words not only report something: they do something. Words are deeds”¹⁴ A sermonic approach that was willing to explore the realms of emotion and experience, and sermon forms that sought to reflect the dynamism and varied genres of the Bible would almost inevitably be more “lively” than those of an earlier time. But the intent was not to entertain the hearers but to engage them in a living encounter with the life-giving Word.

A Brief Defense of the Narrative Approach

In this author’s view one of the potential negatives of the narrative approach to preaching is in fact one of its greatest assets. It’s no secret that some of the earliest work in this field came from traditions in the Church which held a low view of Holy Scripture. Some preachers and churches having gutted the Bible of its authoritative voice among them by adopting an historical-critical view found themselves looking for a new foundation for their preaching. Following the thought of the New Hermeneutic, they turned to the power of language and story.¹⁵ Their theological move was one from the authority of the Word (capital “W”) to the power of a “word event” (lowercase “w”) experienced by the hearers.

These roots of Narrative Preaching have resulted in some distrust among those who hold a high view of Holy Scripture. But they should reconsider. That move toward language is a boon for our cause. Because the New Homiletic takes language seriously, it de facto, takes God’s language seriously. Its dynamics tend toward a more thoroughly biblical homiletic. Even if a preacher views the biblical text as having only a human origin, that preacher is still grappling with the actual words of a divinely inspired Scripture. Attempting to be faithful to the language

¹⁴ Craddock, *Without Authority*, 29.

¹⁵ Allen, *Renewed Homiletic*, 6.

of the received text, those preachers are often, inadvertently, being faithful to the Word itself. This faithfulness to the text can be nothing but a blessing to God's Church.

And how much more this approach can be valuable to us who love both the language of the Bible and the Divine Author of that language! How much more it is incumbent upon us to be faithful in our proclamation of those texts that we acknowledge as being breathed out by God Himself (2 Tim. 3:16). Narrative Preaching contains within it the spirit of the Reformation which brought the Church back to the Bible. It calls us to a serious interaction with the revealed Word and turns us from an overly-simplified sermonic approach that could possibly reduce every biblical text to a trite recitation of doctrinal information.

Most preachers have been trained to force a straitjacket of deductive reason over metaphors, similes, parables, narratives, and myths which in effect restrains rather than releases the vitality of these forms. When preachers feel they have not preached a passage of Scripture unless they have dissected and rearranged that Word into a lawyer's brief, they in reality make the Word of God subservient to one particular, technical kind of reason.¹⁶

Furthermore, those of us who hold a high view of Holy Scripture must be painfully aware that sometimes those who hear us are only half listening. In our increasingly secularized age the phrase "thus saith the Lord" isn't carrying the weight that it once did. As Fred Craddock acknowledged in the title of his seminal book, preachers today speak *As One without Authority*. The narrative approach provides a way for us to deal seriously with the biblical material without running head-on into the intellectual opposition that may be present in many of our hearers. Because narrative works inductively it works to convince the hearer of its authority without demanding that authority to be recognized upfront. Among those who might be less likely to give God's Word a hearing, narrative has the ability to lessen their resistance. And it invites the

¹⁶ Don M. Wardlaw, ed., *Preaching Biblically: Creating Sermons in the Shape of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 16.

hearers to be co-conspirators with the preacher in both their conviction by the Law and their release by the Gospel.

This Is Your Brain on Story

Developments in the pulpit have coincided with developments in the laboratory. Recent advances in brain research have sparked conversations in the fields of education and theology concerning the value of story. As we begin to know more about how the brain works, we are able to design communications that are more effective. People in the fields of neuroscience and biology have been thinking about how stories function in human minds and communities. Consequently both brain science and the social sciences have something to say about the stories in my MAP.

In his book, *Implications of Brain Research for the Church*, Allen Nauss points to the connection between facts and feelings as our brains process input. He notes that the left hemisphere of our brains deals primarily with reason and logic while the right hemisphere processes emotion. Yet, he says, there is no artificial divide. Both sides of our brains work together to process everything. Even the most reasoned and logical presentations of the Gospel, such as those familiar under the older homiletic, will generate emotional responses.

Lutheran theology relies and focuses on the Word of Scripture and on the Word as Jesus himself. So the Word and Jesus inevitably create emotion as they stimulate the brain's emotional structures and are processed in the right brain. Everything we remember is colored by feelings. We influence those feelings by the way the Word is presented, whether we consciously intend to or not.¹⁷

Since emotional response to sermons is inevitable, we should not dismiss an appeal to emotion as being somehow unworthy of those who proclaim the Gospel. On the contrary, if we

¹⁷ Allen Nauss, *Implications of Brain Research for the Church: What it Means for Theology and Ministry* (Minneapolis: Kirk House, 2013), 77.

are creating emotional response “whether we consciously intend to or not” why not be intentional about it? In sermon craft we should consider not just the facts we want to convey but the emotional response we would like to elicit by our proclamation. We should then consider which homiletical tools will be most beneficial in reaching that goal. A balanced approach that uses both logic and emotion (addressing both right and left hemispheres of the brain) will often be the most fitting.

Stories, which speak to the different parts of the brain, are able to teach us in a different way than merely doctrinal discourse is able to. Stories impact our heartrate and breathing. They give us goosebumps or sour stomachs. They set our feet tapping or put us at ease. But they are not mere entertainments. Stories engage us on multiple levels, teaching us life skills and inviting our thoughtful participation (our caring) in the events that are unfolding. As Glenn Nielsen writes in response to Nauss,

Sermons which are designed merely to instruct, that appeal to the intellect to the near exclusion of the body, feelings, intuition and will are deficient. The heart, as the center of spiritual life, representing the whole person before God, requires proclamation that addresses the human person in its complex totality.”¹⁸

As brain science encourages us to address whole persons in our discourse, using varying approaches, it affirms one of the primary impulses of the New Homiletic. That is, it bids us to pay careful attention not just to a sermon’s content but to its hearers.

Brain science provides further insight into the value of sermon stories when Nauss writes about “episodic memories”. This term describes memories in which the emotions associated with an event serve to deepen and lengthen our long term retention. Here the science indicates that people retain things longer and more completely if their emotional response is engaged. Nauss

¹⁸ Glenn Nielsen, “Evaluating and Extending the Research Implications” in *The Pastor’s Brain Manual*, ed. Allen Nauss (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Kirk House, 2015), 52.

writes, “If preachers can make contact with one of these memories, they have a greater opportunity to help the hearer create meaning by making connection between the words they listen to and their semantic and/or episodic memories.”¹⁹ Stories, by nature, open up emotional worlds that facilitate those connections. They invite hearers to reach into the reservoir of their own experience and to make meaningful connections between the story they are hearing and their own personal life.

King David declared “I praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14). The work of brain research calls forth a loud “Amen” to that sentence. The insights of this research invite us to marvel all the more at God’s wondrous creation. And growing in our appreciation for the vast complexity of God’s creative work, it propels our use of varied sermonic approaches, including story, which are able to communicate to our hearers in manifold ways.

Biology and the social sciences also have an interest in stories. Given the ubiquity of story in every human culture and time period, there is genuine curiosity among social scientists about why and how stories work. Researchers are asking what purpose stories serve in shaping individuals and communities. Why do they work so powerfully on us? And what accounts for their enduring existence among us?

When these scientists ponder our powerful connection to story, perhaps their most common answer is to cite the value of stories in helping us to prepare for potential real-life threats. Stories, they argue, are practice fields where fight or flight scenarios can be played out without any true danger. Even fantastical stories about events we would never encounter in real life can provide a simulator for emotional experiences that are quite real and practical. It is this “low-cost

¹⁹ Nauss, *Implications of Brain Research*, 86–87.

vicarious experience” which Janet Burroway and others have identified as the primary benefit of fiction.²⁰

Jonathan Gottschall, an English professor at Washington and Jefferson College, writes about this function of stories to provide real-life experience in his recent book. He says, "Grownups have a tendency to remember the land of make-believe as a heavenly, sun-kissed bunny land. But the land of make-believe is less like heaven and more like hell. Children’s play is not escapist. It confronts the problems of the human condition head-on."²¹ Gottschall’s words are striking for their theological overtones, yet despite the theological jargon it’s clear that Gottschall sees stories as primarily utilitarian. They are practical exercises that help us find advantage in the fight for human survival.

As Christians we can agree that stories may sometimes function as simulators for real life. Our own experiences teach us well enough that when we identify with a character in a story we are often able to gain insights for our own life through that character’s experiences. Living “vicariously” through another, we ponder what we might do in their circumstances and we stockpile wisdom for our lives without placing ourselves in mortal or spiritual danger.

Lisa Cron, a UCLA writing professor with television and cinematic experience, says, “A good story doesn’t *feel* like an illusion. What it feels like is life.”²² And this truth about stories is reflected in the science. Relating the results of brain-imaging studies initially reported in *Psychological Science*, Cron shares that “the regions of the brain that process the sights, sounds, tastes, and movement of real life are activated when we’re engrossed in a compelling

²⁰ Gottschall, Jonathan, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston: Mariner, 2012), 57.

²¹ Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal*, 32.

²² Lisa Cron, *Wired for Story: The Writer’s Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence* (Berkeley: Ten Speed, 2012), 4.

narrative.”²³ Indeed, Princeton Neuroscientist Uri Hasson reports, “If someone tells us how delicious certain foods were, our sensory cortex lights us. If it’s about motion, our motor cortex gets active.”²⁴

This ability to relate to another’s experience through story is a part of the Creator’s design. The God who formed us in His own image has allowed us to see our own reflection in others that we might come to honor Him and love each other the better. My MAP presupposes this God-given ability to identify with others through story. The characters I created were expressly designed to be “true-to-life” vehicles by which others could connect to God’s truth and grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ.

Stories *also are critical in forming community*. Particularly helpful, in my view, are Brian Boyd’s thoughts about the value of stories within a community. He says something interesting about how stories can have value even when we do not identify with any of the characters in a story. Boyd argues that we have an “interested party” response to narrative.

We need not identify with individuals we hear about . . . but we respond to them almost as if we were witnessing the scene, and had a share in the outcome of their actions – especially since in the early human environment most reports would have been about people with whom we were likely to interact for the rest of our lives.²⁵

While Boyd’s view tends to make our response to story merely self-serving, I would take his insight in another direction. I would argue that stories not only provide vital information about others in our community, they also serve to build community. Rather than serving our selfishness, stories can serve to call us out of our selfishness to have an empathetic awareness of

²³ Cron, *Wired for Story*, 4.

²⁴ Leo Widrich, “The Science of Story Telling,” *lifehacker.com*, December 5, 2012, accessed September 2016, <http://lifehacker.com/5965703/the-science-of-storytelling-why-telling-a-story-is-the-most-powerful-way-to-activate-our-brains>.

²⁵ Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 173.

the other's need.

Consider the fascinating ability of story to connect real life feelings and experiences across the divide from one human brain to another. A 2014 article in the *Wall Street Journal*, reports on studies at Princeton University involving shared-story experiences.²⁶ Neuroscientist Uri Hasson has discovered that when different individuals are connected to brain-imaging machinery and exposed to the same story, the patterns in their brain activity begin to show striking similarity. Allison Gropnik of the Journal identifies this as the human equivalent of the Vulcan mind-meld from Star Trek. It is further evidence, if any were needed, of the ability of story to form community by providing shared experiences.

This outward-looking and community-building dynamic of stories is especially true among Christians. In the Church the Holy Spirit is gathering a new community of faith through the great Story of Jesus Christ and His redemption. In this new community the love of Christ compels us to have a vested interest in others. As Paul writes, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Cor. 12:26). We are an "interested party" to stories where we don't personally identify with any of the characters because in those stories we see the opportunity to understand and love our neighbor.

Development of a Sermon Series

A small part of my research was directed toward developing a sermon series for the presentation of my stories. A brief word is in order about the development of the same. I begin with Ronald Allen who describes the two responsibilities that fall to a preacher who is forming a sermon series.

²⁶ Allison Gropnik, "Mind and Matter: Want a Mind Meld? Tell a Compelling Story," *Wall Street Journal*, April, 5, 2014.

(1) The preacher needs to help the congregation become aware of the thematic connections among the sermons. (2) Each sermon must communicate a message that is worthwhile in its own right for the sake of the person who hears only that sermon and not the whole series.²⁷

The second of these considerations was of chief importance to me. The six stories that I desired to tell in my sermons were in fact component parts of a single, greater story. My core group of respondents were asked to hear all, or almost all, of the sermons but the same stricture could not be placed upon the entire congregation, much less on our visitors. There was a call for diligence on my part in designing a series that would allow for each story to stand alone, having coherent meaning and value for its hearers, while simultaneously building toward the climax of the larger narrative.

Among the most useful guidance in forming my series was that from a classroom exercise led by Dean Nadasdy, who currently serves as President of the Minnesota South District of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod.²⁸ Nadasdy recommends creating series that are based on the readings of the pericopal system. This approach provides an overarching trajectory for the pastor’s preaching while also providing the discipline of the liturgical structure, a structure that unites churches across the globe.

In our classroom exercise students were charged to review each of the lectionary readings for the seven-Sunday cycle of Easter and to identify a unifying theme that ran through either the Old Testament, Epistle, or Gospel lessons. That theme was then to be the starting point for a sermon series based on each week’s individual lesson. For example, in that class exercise, using cycle C of the Revised Common Lectionary, a theme of “Encountering the Risen Christ” was identified as being present in each of the seven Gospel readings. From that general theme,

²⁷ Ronald J. Allen, *Wholly Scripture: Preaching Biblical Themes* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 88.

²⁸ The class was “Preaching and Worship” (DM923) Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Winter 2012.

particular themes were developed using each week's appointed text and finally sermons were drafted for each.

The lesson in drawing out each individual theme from one overarching theme served as a North Star in creating the structure for my series and their stories. Though, I ultimately decided to depart from the pericopal system, I did find a way to keep my series close to the themes of the Church Year. This kept my stories in harmony with the readings that were being read each week in the Divine Service, even though I was not preaching on any of them.

Character Creation

Sometimes the characters in sermon stories are one-off characters. They have names but no real identity. They are used for one story one time. In those cases the hearer's memory of the characters and their personalities is not integral to their purpose. Even characters who are used multiple times can be intended only as props to tell the story, their unique personhood not being of vital importance. Here I am reminded of Oswald Hoffman, famed Speaker of the Lutheran Hour, who frequently used the characters Ollie and Swen in his off-air speaking.²⁹ These were caricatures more than characters. But the characters that were requisite for my purposes were of another kind.

The characters of my MAP were to recur in each of the six sermons. And because identification with these repeating characters was something I was intending to measure, they needed to be unique and identifiable persons. They needed to be people, albeit fictional, that my hearers could come to know and care about. It was one of my primary goals that through a relationship with these characters, the hearer's relationship with Christ might be deepened and

²⁹ From a 2014 conversation with Richard Cohrs, a long time worker at Lutheran Hour Ministries.

strengthened.

If one is seeking guidance on how to create such characters, libraries are filled with such advice. Not knowing where to begin, I focused my efforts on the work of a man whose own character creations I have found relatable and compelling. Lawrence Block has not only written prolifically for many decades, he's also had a long career in giving advice to those aspiring to his craft. I found some of his counsel helpful in creating my own memorable characters.

It was not a surprise that one of Block's initial suggestions was to create a backstory for each character.³⁰ What did surprise me was the purpose for that exercise. Block says,

the writer may write out a considerable amount of back story in order to learn more about his characters. He may ultimately keep almost all of what he discovers to himself, sharing rather little of his character's past histories with his readers. All the same this preparation may make it easier for him to write convincingly and consistently about the characters.³¹

I would have approached this task with more limited effort, recording only the basic facts about my characters which I intended to reveal over the course of the story. In that case the backstories would have served as organizational systems for basic information and a checklist for disseminating it. Instead I ended up writing backstories that were not so much for my hearers but for me. They were tools to help me get to know these people that I wanted to introduce to others. And Block's idea that I might find myself writing a great deal of information that I never shared proved prescient indeed.

Block gives warning that when the author has crafted characters that he or she knows and

³⁰ In another place Block suggests doing the same for the room(s) in which characters will meet. Having a picture upfront allows the author to tell a consistent story. My setting was simple and generic enough that I did this only minimally.

³¹ Lawrence Block, *Spider, Spin Me a Web: Lawrence Block on Writing Fiction* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1988), 54.

likes “it’s all too easy to let the external trappings of character get in the way of your story.”³² I had to remember that telling people about my characters was not my main goal. The characters were a means to an end. I couldn’t become so involved in fleshing out their lives and personhood that I failed to communicate the Gospel through them. This principle also required me to be willing to modify my characters and their backstory, even when reticent to do so, if they were not serving the story that I needed them to tell.³³

Names for my characters were another important consideration. Block says, “our writer has to create a history for each character and cap the performance by devising a name which is at once memorable and believable, and which manages to fit the character without being too obvious about it.”³⁴ To the categories of “memorable” and “believable” I added my own concern that the names should not correspond to those of persons in the worshipping congregation. That would only be a distraction. My characters names, like the characters themselves, were means to an end. Their names could not become stumbling blocks to my hearers in connecting with these individuals.

Finally, when characters are designed to recur, as mine were, there is a concern about how much personal detail should be reintroduced in their subsequent appearances. Block cautions that an author cannot assume that someone has read the previous volumes of a book series and so some repeating of details will necessary. “On the other hand,” he writes, “you don’t have to reiterate every single fact you have established about your hero.”³⁵ Hence a balanced approach was called for that respected both the established listener and the newcomer. This is the balance I

³² Block, *Spider, Spin Me a Web*, 81.

³³ In the next chapter I will detail how this became important for my male character, Ray.

³⁴ Block, *Spider, Spin Me a Web*, 16.

³⁵ Lawrence Block, *Telling Lies for Fun and Profit: A Manual for Fiction Writers* (New York: Harper, 1981), 238.

strove to keep in mind in each sermon of the series.

Story Craft and Storytelling

Good characters are only one part of good stories. The tale itself needs to be created and told. Since crafting stories is art and not science, there are no sure paths to success. But there are gifted storytellers whose advice seemed useful to me at the outset of my work. What follows are some guiding principles that were at work as I wrote and shared my stories.

Keep an Eye on the Goal

Andrew Stanton, the Oscar winning writer of *Toy Story*, *Finding Nemo*, and other films, says, “Storytelling is joke telling; it’s knowing your punchline—your ending—knowing that everything you’re saying from the first sentence to the last is leading to a singular goal and ideally confirming some truth that deepens our understanding of who we are as human beings.”³⁶ Stanton identifies a problem that I sometimes find with my preaching. I sometimes have a great beginning but then my thoughts start to wander as I attempt to bring my hearers to one too many destinations. As I sat down to write the six stories that were really one story, I had to know first of all where I wanted the overall narrative to arrive. Then I had to determine the six shorter-term goals that would finally bring us to that destination.

A story goal however was not my singular concern, nor was it my chief concern. Beyond the stories, the goal of this entire enterprise was to connect people to the Word of God. Barbara Brown Taylor says that “the best sermons are those that begin with life, telling stories that have the ring of truth and suggesting the ways in which God’s word addresses the often perplexing

³⁶ Andrew Stanton, “The Clues to a Great Story,” *Ted Talk*, March 21, 2012, accessed winter 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=KxDwieKpawg.

truths of our lives.”³⁷ These are the kinds of stories that I wanted to tell, real-life stories with spiritual consequence. And note how Taylor places the emphasis of sermon stories squarely on the hearers and their lives. The hearers are the focus of the sermons connecting them to the central figure of God’s grand narrative, Jesus. As Julian Friedmann, a film, TV, and literary agent has said, “The story is much more about the audience than it is about the characters or the plot and it’s much more about the audience than it is about the storyteller.”³⁸

Connecting with Hearts and Lives

“Make me care.”³⁹ Andrew Stanton has called this the storytelling commandment. Without this essential engagement of the hearers, whatever a story tells will be difficult to see as relevant.

Part of making people care is to understand that the effectiveness of stories is not necessarily the high drama of events in the narrative. Connection is more powerfully driven by the inner struggle of the characters and the hearer’s sympathetic connection to that struggle. Lawrence Block says, “an author’s ability to motivate his characters affects the readers’ response to the story, not merely creating suspense along the way but making us care what happens to these people.”⁴⁰ For my stories to accomplish their goal, the inner world of my characters needed to speak to the inner world of my hearers. The motivations and responses of my characters need to be reflective of people’s real-life experiences.

Another key to making people “care” was to give my characters “honest conflicts”⁴¹ that didn’t oversimplify life’s problems. I couldn’t tell the kinds of stories that would allow every

³⁷ Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, 36.

³⁸ Jullian Freidman, “The Mystery of Storytelling,” *TEDxEaling*, an independent Ted Talk, November 27, 2012, accessed winter 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=a13-KI4BDUQ.

³⁹ Stanton, *Ted Talk*.

⁴⁰ Block, *Telling Lies*, 166.

⁴¹ Stanton, *Ted Talk*.

issue to be wrapped up neatly at the end of each sermon. Indeed, I didn't even want every issue to be wrapped up neatly at the end of the entire sermon series. Real life is messy and it has loose ends. If I could be honest about that, my hearers would be more likely to find a connection to the stories they were hearing.

Finally, to help my hearers "care" I needed to strike a delicate balance between giving them enough to understand my characters and their situations while not giving them too much. Andrew Stanton talks about "the unifying theory of 2 + 2." He cautions against explaining too much in stories because part of what makes hearers invested is to require them to do some of the work. This enlisting of the hearer's participation is very much in the spirit of the New Homiletic which is reticent to tie up every thought as a prepackaged commodity for the hearer. Rather as Stanton says, "Make the audience put things together. Don't give them 4, give them 2 + 2."⁴²

Writing Dialogue

One of the decisions I made very early was to tell stories that were primarily a conversation between my two characters. As the third-person omniscient narrator of the stories, I would provide a few details about the setting of the stories and the inner thoughts of my characters, but I mostly wanted to listen to these two people talk. Therefore, before I read his counsel, I already agreed with Lawrence Block. "The words your characters speak to one another do more to convey their nuances to the reader than any words you can employ yourself to sketch them."⁴³

Good dialogue may come effortlessly to many of us in daily conversation but it is not effortless to render good dialogue on a piece of paper. Since each character needs to speak with his or her own voice and that voice is not necessarily that of the author, writing good dialogue

⁴² Stanton, *Ted Talk*.

⁴³ Block, *Telling Lies*, 198.

requires constant double checking to make sure that the words and thoughts sound like the genuine product of the individual who is speaking them.

Lastly, to make dialogue more crisp and effective Block suggests that the author minimize the use of proper names. Unless it would lead to confusion about who was speaking, he suggests using pronouns almost exclusively. Since my characters would be one male and one female, using pronouns would serve nicely. But even pronouns, he warns, should be kept to a bare minimum. “In dialogue passages, you can cut down the distance even more by eliminating everything but the dialogue itself. Whatever else you include calls the reader’s attention to the fact that he’s not really overhearing a conversation but reading something that somebody wrote.”⁴⁴ Listeners to my sermons heard a good deal of this “overheard” conversation in my stories.

Rewriting

Screaming in capital letters Lawrence Block says, “DON’T TAKE REWRITING FOR GRANTED. It may very well be that everything you ever publish will make two or more trips through your type-writer on its way to immortality.”⁴⁵ His comment about writing immortal words may be tongue-in-cheek but he’s in deadly earnest about authors needing to revisit and revise their work. I don’t think he’s cautioning against laziness. This is a warning about loving our own words too much to be willing to edit them. Storytellers have to be willing to change some things and to leave others on the editing room floor.

As I kept my story goals in mind, there were several times when I wrote long sections of dialogue that I really liked but was ultimately forced to eliminate. These story segments were

⁴⁴ Block, *Telling Lies*, 173.

⁴⁵ Block, *Telling Lies*, 110–11.

interesting to me as explorations of my characters but they were not getting my story where it needed to be.

Using a Frame

While I followed Lawrence Block in much of his storytelling advice, at one point I was moved to embrace the opposite of what he said. Block is not a fan of using a frame. This literary device sets a story within a superstructure. His objections arise because “the most obvious result of building a frame around a piece of fiction [is to make the reader] ... conscious of the fact that this is indeed a story.”⁴⁶

Block wants to strip away all markers that would make a reader aware of the fictional world into which he has been invited. But I wasn't writing a novel; I was writing a sermon. Though I needed my story and characters to be “true-to-life,” it would have been counterproductive to my ministry if I gave my hearers the impression that I was publicly sharing confidential stories about real people. It seemed to me that a framing device might be just the thing I needed.

I could have been blatant, prefacing my stories with a legal-sounding disclaimer that any similarities to real persons or events was purely coincidental. But the similarities were not coincidental. And such a disclaimer could have rendered the stories that followed it ineffective. But using a simple frame would allow me to “tip my hand” to the congregation, letting them know that my characters and their story were fabrications, while not breaking the “mood” completely.

With little variation I chose to introduce my stories by telling the congregation that we

⁴⁶ Block, *Telling Lies*, 176.

were once again making a “visit” to the New Horizons Living Center and to our friends Ray and Lana. Since none of us were actually going to that fictional destination, and since none of us actually knew these “friends,” it was sufficiently clear that the events and persons we were about to hear were not historical. In the same way, at the end of the stories I closed the frame with comments that we were now leaving our friends Ray and Lana until another day.

Conclusion

A great building rests upon foundations that are sunk deep within the earth. They are not seen but without them the structure would collapse upon itself. In the same way my research for this project provided a foundation on which I could build. The impulses of the New Homiletic, the insights of brain science, and the creative genius of great storytellers were pillars anchored in bedrock that would provide strength and support for the part of my project that would now become visible to the world.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PROJECT DEVELOPED

Introduction

I don't remember the exact day when I first met Ray and Lana. I was in my office and the rest of the building was silent when they dropped by, first one and then the other, both on the same day but I don't recall which stopped by first. I do remember as they told me about themselves I had the feeling that I had always known them. I couldn't wait to introduce them to others.

The following pages tell the story of my project from its initial design, through its implementation and evaluation. It tells how I created Ray and Lana, how I designed a sermon series to introduce them to the congregation, and how they then helped me to share the Good News about Jesus with those who heard. Included in this narrative is a report of decisions I made to modify my initial project design and the rationale behind those adjustments. The chapter divisions below correspond as closely as possible to the sequential order of the events as they occurred.

Designing a Series

"Timing is everything," the old saw goes and the design for my sermon series depended greatly on the time and season when it would begin. While a summer series might offer more flexibility in choosing themes and texts, I was concerned that St. John's traditional summer slump in worship attendance might adversely impact my research. I was also concerned that vacation plans by the people in my small group might hinder their ability to commit to the

project. A Lenten series was a possibility but I had a pastoral concern that the stories I wanted to tell were not the best fit for St. John's during that season. An assessment of St. John's worship and activity calendars indicated that a winter series would work best for us.

The four Sundays of Advent together with the final two Sundays of the previous Church Year gave me six consecutive Sundays in which to plan my series. The thematic crossover of the readings at the beginning and end of the Church Year would provide a certain cohesiveness to that time frame. I needed only to determine the exact texts and sermon themes I would use.

I began by working through the pericopes for the six Sundays from November 15 through December 20, 2015. I grasped at a few straws but wasn't able to identify a particular set of readings that seemed (1) connected to each other and (2) suitable for my story-writing purposes. But somewhere in the process, as I was leafing through the pages of *Lutheran Worship*, our hymnal at St. John's, I came upon the O Antiphons.¹

The O Antiphons have long been a part of the Church's liturgical life in the week leading up to Christmas. These seven liturgical verses were designed to accompany the chanting of the *Magnificat* on the days from December 17 through 23. But they are best known through their manifestation in the Advent hymn, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*.

The titles of Christ that the antiphons invoke were seasonally appropriate and, as I discovered in a quick internet search, were each derived from a text in the prophecies of Isaiah. Following the lead of the familiar hymn I adopted the title "Come Lord Jesus" for the sermon series and the title of Christ in each antiphon became the titles of my weekly themes.²

¹ *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1982), 288–89.

² The texts and titles for each Sunday in the series are found in Appendix B.

Creating My Characters

Having the basic structure for my sermon series in place, I began to think about the types of characters who would best serve my sermonic goals. The most important consideration was that they should be genuine individuals with whom my hearers could identify.

My plan was to have one man and one woman, with different ages and experiences.³ Their differences would maximize the possibility that my hearers could identify with at least one of them and would provide opportunities to tell interesting stories. Having chosen to make the male character older and the female character younger, I began to write character sketches for each of them. And I began with Ray, as he was soon to be known.

Raymond Cyril Mertz began his theoretical life as Stanley but somewhere in the creative process that name changed. The name Raymond was plucked out of thin air but seemed to suit my character better. It fit the criteria of being memorable and believable, while not being in current use in the congregation. (Perhaps ironically I was told after the first sermon in the series that some members knew a local man named Raymond Mertz, but at that point I had to run with it.)

In one sitting I began to type out Ray's backstory.⁴ Ray, I decided, was old enough and impaired enough that there would never be any suggestion of sexuality in his close relationship with the younger female character. He was a widower, 77 years old, a father of children who were somewhat estranged. He was a retired construction worker, an American History buff, and a member of St. Andrew's Lutheran Church. His story and his personality were an admixture of

³ In my earliest thoughts about this project I had envisioned a larger cast of characters in this series. My advisor, Glenn Nielsen, suggested that I would do better with only two individuals. This was one of the best and most consequential pieces of advice I was to receive. There could have been no better way to convey what I desired to share. More than two characters would have made it more difficult to get to know any of them and it would have hampered the deep relationship that I was able to develop between just two individuals.

⁴ Ray and Lana's full background stories are found in Appendix E.

twenty or more older men whom I have known in both my personal and pastoral lives. He was a little bit of each of them and yet he was none of them.

Illana Perez came into existence with more difficulty. It might have been the simple fact that she was a female and I am not, but I had to work harder to figure out who Lana was. Unlike Ray, she wasn't pieced together from component parts but was more nearly a complete fabrication. I needed certain things from Lana to tell a story but I didn't want to make her a foil, but a sympathetic character who had some troubles.

Lana was twenty-two, I discovered, and was at a time of transition in her life. Having discontinued her studies at community college she was doing some office work that she enjoyed. But a failed relationship and financial restraints left Lana living back home with a distant father and an overly critical mother. She was close to her younger sister who was away at college but Tammy's apparent success in life had always cast Lana in an unfavorable light. Lana, like Ray, was a member of St. Andrew's Lutheran Church, though not a very active one. Her relationship with God, like that with her parents, was strained. And most notably for my narrative, Lana had recently, and uncharacteristically, gotten herself into trouble.

Even before Ray and Lana had names and personalities I had been thinking about the proper setting for their interaction. I had thought about having them work together on a church project or committee, perhaps as volunteer office staff, but as I worked on their backstories the appropriate setting became clear. Ray was living in a nursing home and that's where they would visit. And the cause for Lana's weekly visits to Ray would become a vital part of the story that I would tell.

I had background sketches for my characters and a general outline for my sermon series, and now I needed to put them together. I needed six stand-alone stories that would reflect each

sermon's theme and text. At the same time I needed all of those stories to work together as part of a single larger story about Ray and Lana. I began to make notes. I deleted, added, and rearranged until a basic story arc appeared. I outlined the story points that each sermon would hit in order to connect with its theme and work in successful harmony with the stories told before and after it.⁵

The full text of each sermon was not to be written until the week when it was preached but there was always a clear understanding of where the sermons were going. And in the eventual fleshing out of the sermon stories I was surprised by how much of Ray and Lana's backstories I chose not to use. That Lana's full name was Illana was never mentioned. Nor was it mentioned that Ray had lost a child earlier in life. These details and so many others just never seemed relevant to the stories I was telling even though they were very much a part of who these individuals were.

I did make one major change to my initial character designs. As Ray and Lana began to talk with one another I realized that I could not accomplish my sermonic goals unless one of them could clearly articulate their Christian faith. Lana's troubled relationship with the Lord and with others couldn't easily change, but Ray was able to gain a few more spiritual muscles.

In Ray's original incarnation he was faithful in worship but not a deeply knowledgeable believer. He was, in short, like many men in the church today. I had Ray coming to the church through his marriage and remaining in the church even after his wife Helen had died. He was a Christian man but he was not one who could naturally or comfortably speak about the Lord. That needed to change. If Ray could talk to Lana about Jesus then He could do a lot of my preaching for me. And if Ray could talk to Lana in a way that didn't seem preachy, all the better.

⁵ The story points are included in the outline materials for the series in Appendix B.

Congregational Response Cards

To evaluate my project I needed effective tools to gather data. I planned to receive feedback from two sources. First, I planned to measure the response of the worshipping congregation on a weekly basis. Second, I intended to recruit a small group of individuals who would provide me with more comprehensive feedback through personal interviews.

For the general congregation a brief, seven-question response card was created.⁶ This questionnaire was printed on half sheets of standard paper and included in the weekly bulletin on each Sunday of the series. The form asked questions about the hearer's impressions of the sermon and their connection to the characters. And it asked them to evaluate the benefit of the characters in relating to the Biblical concept under consideration. The card remained essentially the same week after week, the only adjustments were to reflect the weekly change in sermon title. Also the color of the paper was changed each week to prevent future confusion of my paperwork.

The response cards were collected after each Sunday services in boxes at the rear of the sanctuary. Being bundled together under a paper covering, ordinarily by the church secretary, they were then given to me and remained unseen and unread until the entire cycle of sermons was completed. The cards provided an ongoing curiosity but no real temptation for me as they began to pile up in my file cabinet.

Six of the weekly questions on those cards required respondents to indicate their answer on a seven-point Likert scale. I had intended to use a ten-point scale but some of my reading at Survey Monkey's website indicated that no more than seven options were preferred to obtain

⁶ An example of the response card can be found in Appendix C.

optimal results.⁷ By choosing a scale of seven I was also allowing my respondents the option of a neutral response. There was a risk in doing this, since neutral responses would not be scalable in my analysis but I felt it was respectful to my congregation to give them this option. Besides, if a large portion of my hearers responded in a non-committal way that would be evidence enough that my theory about recurring characters was not correct.

The seventh and final question on the response card was not only of academic but keen personal interest. It asked my hearers which of the two characters they most identified with in that day's sermon. Was it Ray, Lana, both, or neither? I was interested to see the trend lines as the series progressed and as an author I was hopeful that Ray and Lana were liked. In the final analysis the answers gleaned from that seventh question proved to be some of the most interesting.

At the outset of this project there was a plan to provide a survey or response form that would be available online. The previously mentioned reading on [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com) was part of investigating that possibility. Two things, however, caused me to eliminate this component from my research. One, I was concerned that those who listened to the sermons after they were posted online would be in some way hearing them out of context. This would hold true for any sermon heard in this way, divorced from its liturgical context in the Divine Service. And for good or ill that difference in the hearing environment might have skewed my results. But second, and more concerning for the integrity of my research, was an inability to get an "honest" pool of respondents with an online tool. I have many dear friends from my former parish and elsewhere who have supported me in my DMin studies and who continue to listen to my sermons online.

⁷ "The Likert Scale Explained," Survey Monkey, accessed October 2015, <https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/likert-scale/>.

They would have been glad to participate in this process and would have eagerly embraced an online opportunity to do so. However, my understanding is that this was a project aimed at my current congregation. I needed to know how St. John's and those who were worshipping with us at St. John's responded to these sermons. No opportunity for online response was ultimately provided.

Week after week as the responses came in I was pleased to see a healthy percentage of the worshipping congregation participating. St. John's is not a large congregation, often having only eighty in worship. Most of those present on any given Sunday took the time to fill out a card and submit it. I was also pleased to see that the percentage of those responding did not diminish week by week. This was an indication to me that they remained willing participants in the process.

Finally, a month or more after my series was completed, the pastors in my circuit began to read and discuss Fred Craddock's recent book, *Craddock on the Craft of Preaching*. I had read the book previously but was caught off guard by this:

We do not know how to evaluate ourselves effectively, so it is a waste of time to get into introverted and convoluted evaluations. Stop printing those little sheets to get everyone to evaluate your sermon so you can get a doctor of ministry degree from someplace. Just leave it alone.⁸

I laughed. With all due respect, Professor Craddock, that's easy for you to say; you already have your doctorate.

Small Group Respondents

In addition to the general responses I was gathering from the larger group, I identified a small group of individuals to give me more wide-ranging feedback. I looked for at least eight individuals who, being regular worshippers, were likely to be hear all six of my sermons. I asked

⁸ Fred Craddock, *Craddock on the Craft of Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice), 183.

them, in addition to filling out the weekly surveys, to provide a written response to a series of questions at the midpoint of the sermon series and to sit down with me for a one on one interview at the conclusion.

I initially contacted ten individuals, assuming that not all would respond in the affirmative. My criteria for selecting them included a desire to have some diversity in my group. I asked six women and four men, a reasonable reflection of the congregation's demographics. And rather than looking for great diversities in age, I looked for people who had some differences in their life experience at St. John's; that is, I was looking for some lifetime members and for some who had become part of the congregation more recently.

My invitation to this group was sent by email.⁹ Requesting their assistance, I outlined my project and the work I was asking them to do. With my request I gave them the promise of my gratitude and of their anonymity. They were free to share and discuss their participation in this project but I was not free to do so. That promised anonymity was even true within the group, since they would never meet together as a group.

All ten who were asked responded in the affirmative, though two subsequently asked to be dismissed, one man and one woman. One had health concerns and the other had personal commitments that prevented full participation. The eight who were able to complete the process ultimately provided invaluable thoughts and feedback for which I continue to be grateful.

One unforeseen difficulty with the small group was the poor quality of some of the responses to the midpoint questionnaire. Perhaps it was always a weakness in my plan to ask for written responses. Writing is a chore for many and while I received some thoughtful responses much of what I received was almost too brief to be of use. In fact, in two cases no response at all

⁹ Copies of my communications with the Small Group can be found in Appendix D.

was received to the midpoint questions.

One of my goals in having a midpoint and endpoint reflection from this group was the hope of gauging any changes in them during the process. I was ultimately able to get a sense of that retrospectively in our final interviews. In the end, therefore, my “midpoint crisis” did not prove critical to my research but it clearly was not ideal.

The Sermons

As I indicated earlier, the task of writing out the individual sermons was tackled week by week. The weekly sermon themes and the trajectory of each sermon story was known from the outset but that left the bulk of the writing still to be done. This method may have been less safe than having a complete set of sermon texts from the outset, but it was more honest to how I might approach building such a series in the future. Only the rarest preacher has his next six sermons fully written and filed away for use.¹⁰

I set a goal of completing each sermon by the Thursday before it was to be delivered, a goal I largely met. This gave me ample time to become comfortable with the text before its Sunday debut. Like most of my sermons they were written in my office with the door closed and with everything silent except my own speaking of the sermon as I wrote it. I’m not sure if the closed door is to minimize interruptions to my work or to save me the embarrassment of being seen talking to myself. But I have found that sounding out my sentences in my own ears helps me to write sermons that are better suited for other people’s ears as well.

To get an accurate read on the congregation’s response I designed each sermon to follow a similar pattern. Minimizing variables in style would give me increased confidence that any

¹⁰ The text for each of the six the sermons in my series can be found in Appendix F.

differences in response from week to week were related to the characters and their story and not to the sermon style. Each sermon opened with an introduction to the theme of the day. In some cases that required providing more explanation or biblical background than for others. The second and largest part of the sermon was the story of Ray and Lana. And somehow that story was to live out that week's theme in a real life context. It was to be a picture of how our theme intersected with our everyday reality. And since each theme was a title for Jesus Christ, the stories were consequently pictures of our daily life with Him. Lastly, the sermons had a brief concluding word that served to recrystallize the day's thought and bring everything into final focus.

The experience of writing Ray and Lana's story was somewhat surreal. They each had a personality and history of their own and when they began to talk to one another they started to take on a life of their own. At times it was as if I was only transcribing a conversation to which I myself was a witness. Consequently, the experience that I wanted my hearers to have in listening to their dialogue became my own experience as well. In fact it took something like an effort of will to redirect Ray and Lana's conversation when I determined it wasn't trending in the right direction for my purposes. As much as I was enjoying their conversations when they began to take on a life of their own, Ray and Lana had a job to do. As Francis Rossow might say, "by hook or by crook" they had to preach the Gospel.¹¹

The delivery of my sermons also required some planning. I sometimes preach from the pulpit and sometimes from the floor. Again, I didn't want variations in context artificially skewing my results. All six sermons needed to be delivered in a similar way. Since I did not have confidence in my own memory for the dialogue in my stories, and because I wanted to have a

¹¹ This quote is from personal memory.

printed text for each, I determined to use the pulpit.

I also decided to wear my reading glasses when telling the story portion of the sermon. Ordinarily, I would never wear my reading glasses in the pulpit; I just make my notes in large print. Putting on my glasses to talk about Ray and Lana, as if I was reading a storybook was another nod to the fact that these were not true events we were hearing but only true-to-life. I continued that practice throughout the series, but if I had it to do over again I don't think I would have done this. As the series progressed it began to feel almost too artificial, too corny. It might be an interesting thought for some other project to consider how something like that might influence people's hearing of a sermon.

Final Interviews

My sermon series concluded the week before Christmas. This meant that almost all of my final interviews were conducted in the New Year, in some cases weeks afterward. But any concern I might have had about the deleterious effect of this time lag were soon dismissed. Even those I met with last continued to have vivid memories of the series and lively responses to my questions.¹²

These one-on-one interviews were arranged by telephone or email at the participant's convenience. The location of the interview was also of their choosing. Most came to my office. The average length of our conversation was around forty minutes. And each of them consented to my taking notes as we talked and agreed that I could tape our conversation for the sake of perfecting my notes at a later time.

The nature of our conversations were largely free-flowing. The questions I prepared were

¹² Verbatims of these interviews are in Appendix G.

designed to guide our conversation but not to govern it. Although I began the questioning, where possible I allowed my respondent to direct our conversation. If we were looking at question three and they brought up something I was going to address in question six I didn't ask them to hold their comment, I moved my pencil down the page and took notes at the appropriate place. This approach not only avoided stifling the conversation, it brought things into focus that I might not have considered in my own formula of questions.

The thoughtful answers of these individuals were extremely helpful in putting flesh on the patterns I saw in the general responses of the congregation. They also gave me a much clearer reading on how effective this sermonic approach had been and why things did not always trend in the way I thought that they might. Their suggestions were also very helpful in thinking about potential future applications of this project's focus on recurring characters.

One enlightening snapshot of my hearer's identification with Ray and Lana was the way my small group was able to describe their appearance. My stories were heavy on dialogue and light on descriptions. I had intentionally avoided describing Ray or Lana's hair color, height, weight or other distinguishing characteristics. Yet when asked, each of my participants had a clear image of Ray and Lana in their minds. Those images often contrasted with the working image in mind but they were no less valid. And again these clear images showed that Ray and Lana had become "real people" to my hearers. Thomas Long writes about the paucity of information that often attends the stories in the Bible. He says, "Another characteristic of biblical narrative is its spare style. Biblical stories are told leanly and economically, with a minimum of detail...This narrative reticence invites readers to 'flesh out' the story in their own imaginations and highlights those details which are provided."¹³ Clearly my hearers were "fleshing out" Ray

¹³ Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms*, 78.

and Lana, doing my writer's work for me.

Characterizing the Data

The interviews were concluded and the response cards were at last unsealed. The final step in my project now required collating the data I collected in order to evaluate my results and draw some conclusions. Was I correct in postulating that recurring characters would aid my hearers in connecting to the Word of God and its meaning for their lives? If present, how significant was that assistance? And what future applications and insights might be gleaned from this project not only for my own future ministry but perhaps also for that of others? The results and my conclusions drawn from them will be the focus of the following and concluding chapters.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE PROJECT EVALUATED

Introduction

After the last sermon was preached, I was finally able to break the seals on the congregational response cards that had been collected during the previous six weeks. An initial scan of those cards was largely affirming but in some ways confusing. I wasn't seeing the trends I expected. I also found that some in the congregation had taken the time to leave comments on their cards, even though none were called for. It was at this time that I was also able to schedule the final interviews with my small group of eight individuals. The one-on-one conversations with these men and women were extremely valuable to my research.

Below are the results of these evaluative tools and an analysis of what they reveal concerning the central questions of my project: Would the people of St. John's Lutheran Church in Millvale, Pennsylvania, find the use of recurring characters in my sermons to be a significant aid in appropriating the Word of God for own lives and contexts? And was there a demonstrable increase in affinity for these characters over the six weeks – did they become even more effective as people came to know them over time? The answer to question one seemed clear and unequivocal. The answer to the second question was less definitive.

Congregational Response Cards

Like most congregations, the Sunday attendance at St. John's fluctuates from week to week. This fluctuation is reflected in the number of response cards received for each of my sermons. From an initial high of 64 participants to a low of 40, the percentage of those who took

the time to share their opinions remained higher than 60 percent of those present on each occasion. In addition to reviewing the responses to each of my seven statements, I will compare the response of some statements to that of others to further evaluate the data I received.

Statement One

“Today’s sermon story with Ray and Lana helped me to see Jesus as [theme]” Each week this statement was modified to reflect the particular title of Christ that was under consideration that day: Wisdom; Adonai; Root of Jesse; etc. The response to this statement, together with those for statements 3 and 6, were the most important for evaluating the effectiveness of my project. Significantly, this statement was not inquiring about the effectiveness of the sermon as a whole but focused in particular on the storied portion of the sermon. Judging by their own personal experience with my characters, did the sermon story that day help God’s people to see Jesus in the particular light of the Divine title we were considering? The overwhelming response was in the affirmative.

Table 1.1 indicates the responses to Statement One in raw percentages over the six weeks of the series.¹ The information on this table includes those who indicated a “neutral” opinion and those who did not indicate any response to that statement.² Table 1.2 represents the same information in graph form without representing the “neutral” and “no-answer” responses. Table 1.3 provides both the percentages and a graphic representation of those percentages when all of the “agrees” are combined and viewed in contrast to the combined “disagrees.” Similar tables

¹ The seven-point scale provided on the response card labeled the leftmost option as “strongly agree” and the rightmost as “strongly disagree.” No label was given for the other options. For the purposes of this analysis, I will discuss the results to this and other statements using the common metrics: strongly agree; agree; somewhat agree; neutral; somewhat disagree; disagree; and strongly disagree.

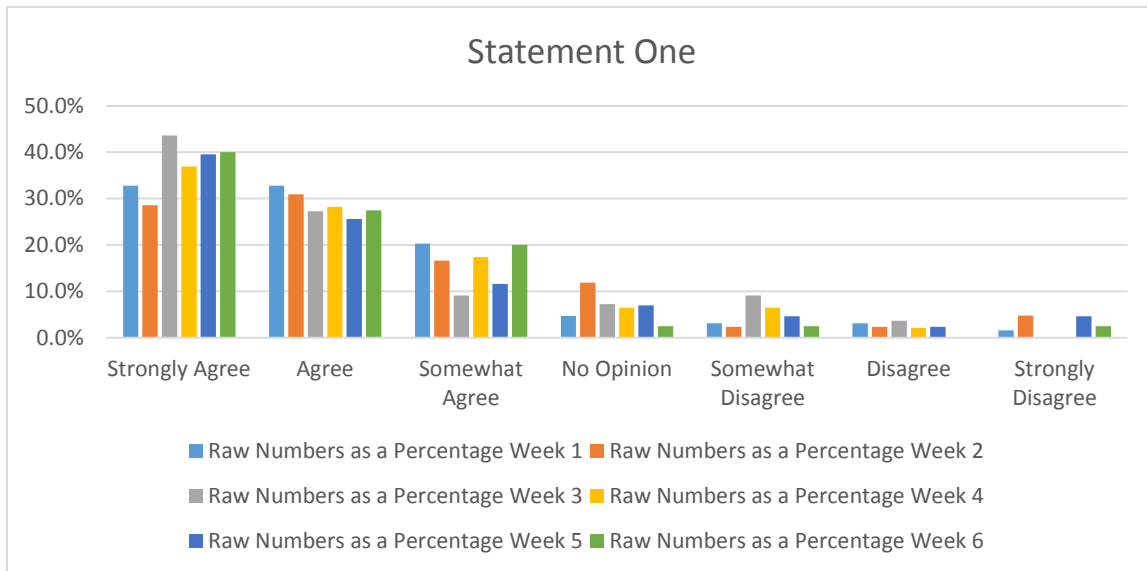
² In a few cases no response was given for every question on one whole side of the response card. In those instances it appears that the respondent was not aware that the questions continued on the other side.

will be provided for each of the statements on the response card.

Table 1.1. Response to Statement One by Percentage

S1. Raw Numbers as a Percentage						
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Strongly Agree	32.8%	28.6%	43.6%	37.0%	39.5%	40.0%
Agree	32.8%	31.0%	27.3%	28.3%	25.6%	27.5%
Somewhat Agree	20.3%	16.7%	9.1%	17.4%	11.6%	20.0%
No Opinion	4.7%	11.9%	7.3%	6.5%	7.0%	2.5%
Somewhat Disagree	3.1%	2.4%	9.1%	6.5%	4.7%	2.5%
Disagree	3.1%	2.4%	3.6%	2.2%	2.3%	0.0%
Strongly Disagree	1.6%	4.8%	0.0%	0.0%	4.7%	2.5%
No Answer	1.6%	2.4%	0.0%	2.2%	4.7%	5.0%

Table 1.2. Response to Statement One, Week-to-Week Trends



In Table 1.2 we can already see the dramatic difference between the “agrees” and “disagrees.” This same data is more profoundly evident in Table 1.3. However, Table 1.2 allows us to examine the breakdown within the “agree” and “disagree” ranges. While it is not always the case, generally those who “strongly agree” represent a higher percentage than those who only

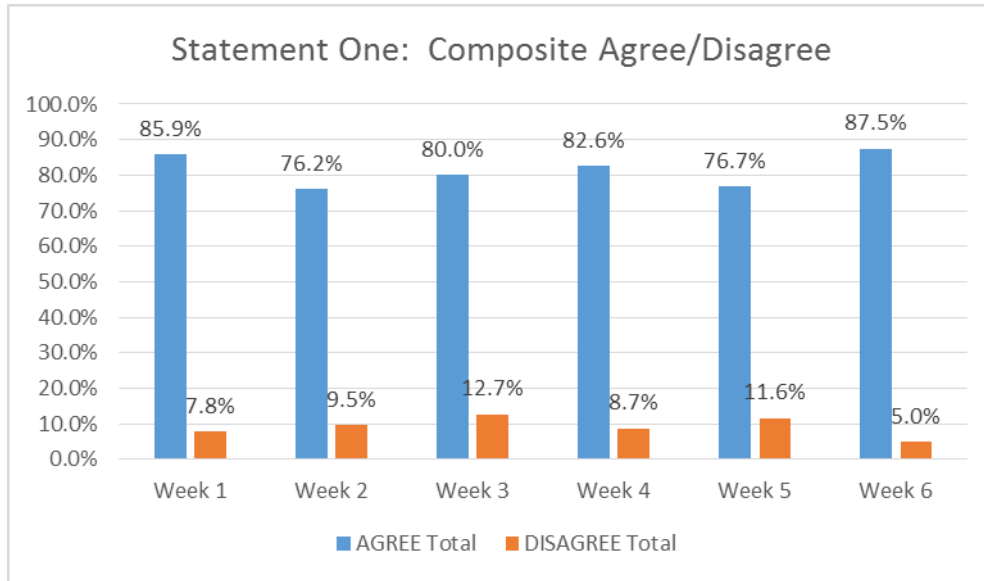
“agree.” Similarly those who “agree” generally represent a higher percentage than those who only “somewhat agree.” This indicates a strong affirmative response to Statement One.

“Somewhat agrees” are consistently the smallest percentage of those in the “agree” cluster. Week 2 is the only instance where “agrees” are greater than “strongly agrees”. (They were identical percentages on Week 1.) After Week 2 those “strongly agreeing” remain the most significant percentage of all respondents. This indicates a trend toward a more affirmative response within the “agree” cluster.

Among those disagreeing with the effectiveness of the weekly story to convey a truth about Jesus, there is a slight preponderance toward milder disagreement. The percentages here are small enough that it’s difficult to say anything with certainty about trends within those responding negatively. However, while positive respondents seemed to trend more positive over time, there appears to be no corresponding trend in the “disagrees” which might indicate an increasingly negative response.

The sermon of Week 2 generated a more mixed response than the others. This sermon generated the highest percentages of those who “strongly disagreed” and of those who expressed a “neutral opinion.” And again this is the only week where the “strongly agree” group was not the greatest percentage or tied for the greatest percentage. It could be that the quality of the sermon on Week 2 was inferior to the others. It could also be that the concept we were considering that week was somewhat esoteric. The theme for Week 2 was *O Adonai*, a title for Christ that, unlike the others, is rendered in the Hebrew language. Whatever the reason, Week 2 is an outlier in the data, but not dramatically enough to distort the overall impression of the data.

Table 1.3. Statement One, Agrees v. Disagrees



On Table 1.3 that the aggregate percentage of those who expressed some degree of disagreement with Statement One rose to high of 12.7% in Week 3 and fell to a low of 5% in Week 6. Again, there is no evident trend, up or down, among the “disagrees” over the course of the sermon series. The same also seems true about the aggregate percentage of those who “agreed” to one degree or another. The percentage of those who agree shows a low of 76.2% in Week 2, a week which shows other aberrant data, and reaches a high of 87.5% in Week 6. That high mark of agreement reflects little difference from the 85.9% affirmative response seen in Week 1. This raises some questions for my expectation about a growing affinity for the characters that I had presumed at the outset of this project. The one-on-one interviews would help me to characterize this data.

Statement Two

“Today’s sermon story with Ray and Lana was ‘true-to-life.’” Statement Two was intentionally devoid of theological content. It was not asking whether the stories functioned to

communicate spiritual truths. It simply asked if they seemed real. This statement was to provide a metric about the quality of the characters I created and the setting into which they were placed. It was not one of the chief questions under consideration but it was foundational to those questions. If the stories I wrote were deemed defective, or were seen as inaccurate portrayals of our human life and condition, then they would not provide genuine results concerning the effectiveness of recurring characters in sermons.

Table 2.1. Response to Statement Two by Percentage

S2. Raw Numbers as a Percentage						
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Strongly Agree	46.9%	35.7%	47.3%	50.0%	44.2%	60.0%
Agree	25.0%	35.7%	25.5%	30.4%	27.9%	27.5%
Somewhat Agree	17.2%	16.7%	12.7%	6.5%	16.3%	2.5%
No Opinion	3.1%	0.0%	3.6%	6.5%	2.3%	2.5%
Somewhat Disagree	1.6%	0.0%	5.5%	0.0%	0.0%	2.5%
Disagree	3.1%	4.8%	5.5%	4.3%	4.7%	0.0%
Strongly Disagree	1.6%	4.8%	0.0%	2.2%	4.7%	2.5%
No Answer	1.6%	2.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.5%

The overall response to Statement Two was affirmative. The people of St. John’s indicated that they viewed the sermon stories as being true to life. Though again, there is a much smaller percentage indicating a negative response, those who “agreed” with Statement Two were never less than 85.5% of all respondents and reached a high of 90% in the final week.³

Tables 2.1 and 2.2 also show that the affirmative response is weighted toward a “strong” affirmation. With the exception of Week 2, when they were tied, “strongly agrees” are always a larger percentage than “agrees.” In every week, those “somewhat agreeing” represent the

³ See Table 2.3.

smallest percentage of those in the “agree cluster.”

Table 2.2. Response to Statement Two, Week-to-Week Trends

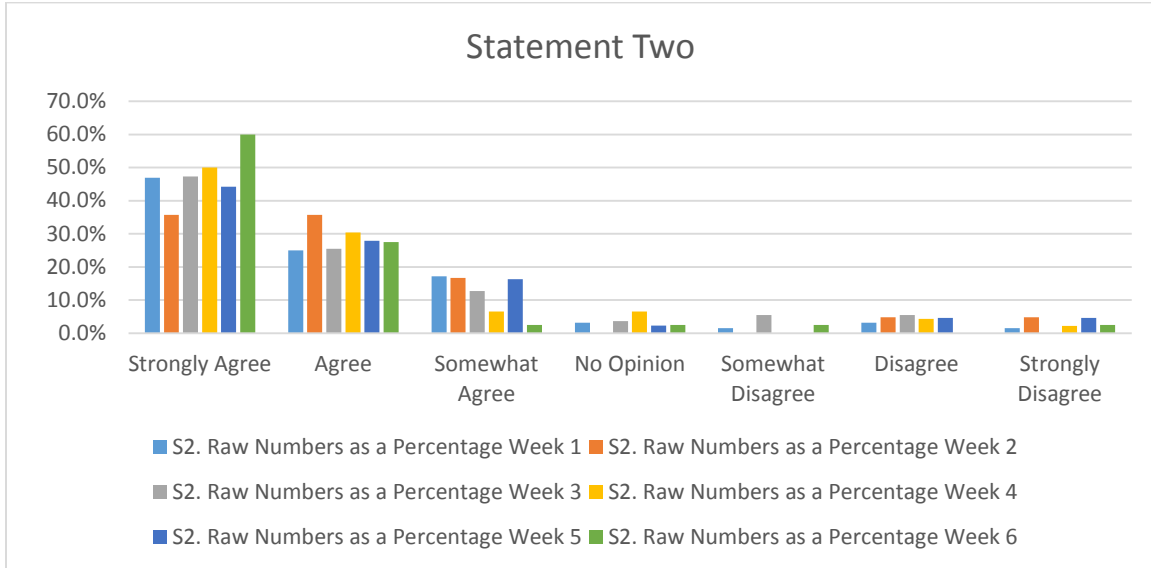
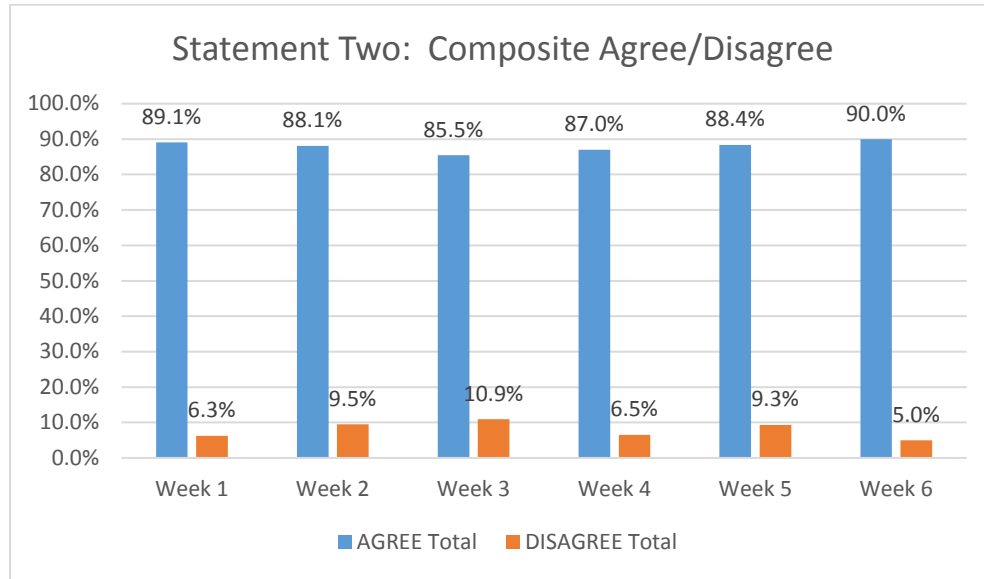


Table 2.2 shows a dramatic spike in those “strongly agreeing” with Statement Two in the final week of the series. At 60% it is a full ten percentage points higher than the previous high seen in Week 4. As such, this spike reads as an “Amen” to my non-theological question about the realness of the stories I told. This may suggest that as God’s people got to know Ray and Lana there was a “warming” toward them, perhaps especially as we were about to bid them farewell, at least for a time.

Table 2.3. Statement Two, Agrees v. Disagrees



Statement Three

“Today’s sermon story helped me to apply God’s Word to my own life.” This was the golden question. First, it was personal, being about “my life.” And second, it was relational, being about “God’s Word.” This question stands not only at the heart of my project but at the heart of all Christian preaching. Is this proclamation successful in sharing God’s Word in such a way that it is received as being “for you” and useable “by you”? Again this statement points the respondent, not to the sermon in general, but specifically to the storied portion of the sermon.

Here the numbers were quite strong but admittedly less strong than I would have hoped. The most positive response came in the initial week when 89.1% of respondents showed some level of agreement.⁴ But immediately following, in Week 2, there was a series low of only 78.6%. Week 2 did seem to be the weakest of the series, but I would have liked to have seen a

⁴ See Table 3.3.

number in the ninetieth percentile or higher here. It is one thing to tell stories that are true-to-life as Statement Two had gauged, but stories told from the pulpit have a higher calling. They must serve the Gospel. When those with a “neutral” response are included, it is seen that more than ten percent of those who listened to my stories did not find them beneficial in applying God’s Word to their own lives.

Table 3.1. Response to Statement Three by Percentage

S3. Raw Numbers as a Percentage						
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Strongly Agree	40.6%	31.0%	47.3%	47.8%	44.2%	37.5%
Agree	31.3%	33.3%	18.2%	34.8%	20.9%	40.0%
Somewhat Agree	17.2%	14.3%	21.8%	4.3%	14.0%	7.5%
No Opinion	4.7%	7.1%	7.3%	6.5%	11.6%	7.5%
Somewhat Disagree	0.0%	2.4%	1.8%	2.2%	2.3%	0.0%
Disagree	3.1%	7.1%	3.6%	2.2%	2.3%	2.5%
Strongly Disagree	1.6%	2.4%	0.0%	2.2%	4.7%	2.5%
No Answer	1.6%	2.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.5%

This statement, when compared to others, generated large percentages of “neutral” responses. It may not be the best course to draw conclusions from “neutral” data, but the numbers do suggest some ambivalence about the value of my stories by a significant number of respondents.

Additionally, while there is some fluctuation in response from week to week, there doesn’t seem to be any indication of a general trend. As the series progressed, the respondents did not find the stories generally more beneficial for their life or faith, nor did they find the stories generally *less* helpful. Rather, the fluctuations seem to be a measure of the quality of each individual story. The responses to Statement Three call into question one of the key expectations of my project. If there is no general upward trend that is visible over time, then the fact that my

characters were recurring and growing more familiar to my hearers did not seem to be impacting their ability to connect to God’s Word through them. It is in this regard that the personal interviews would be helpful in interpreting the data I was seeing.

Table 3.2. Response to Statement One, Week-to-Week Trends

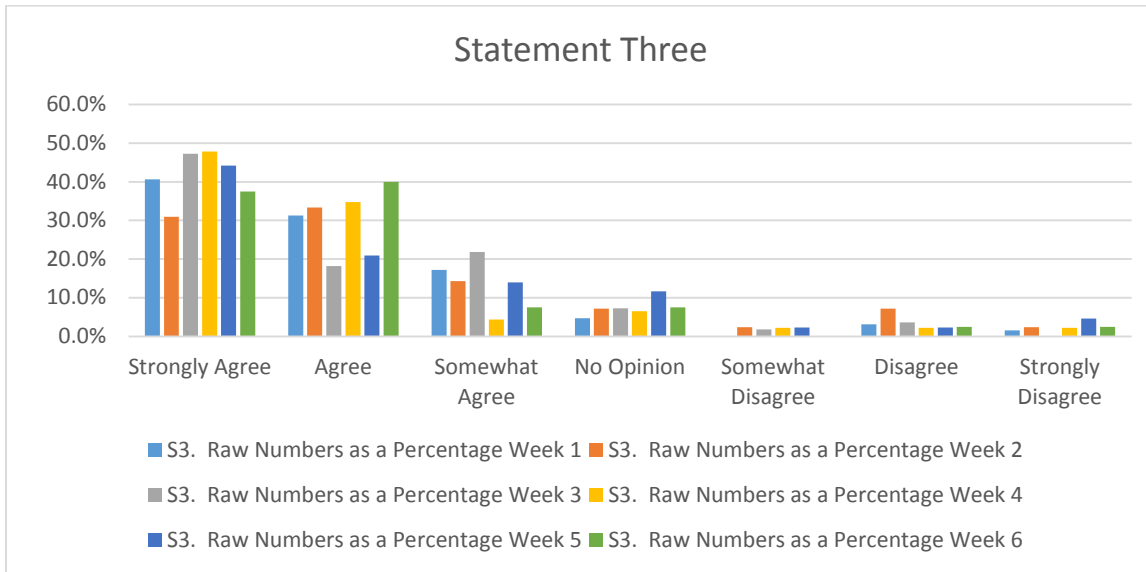
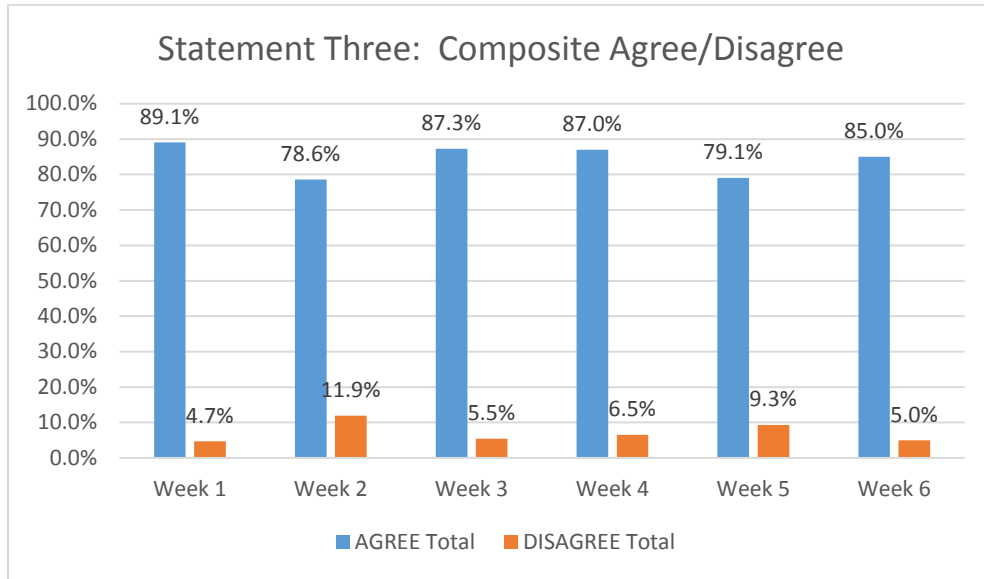


Table 3.2 reveals that among those who did “agree” on some level, the responses are weighted more toward “strong” affirmation as we had seen in response to previous statements. However, compared to the trends on Tables 1.2 and 2.2 the preponderance toward “strong agreement” is more muted.

Table 3.3. Statement Three, Agrees v. Disagrees



Statement Four

“Today’s sermon story would likely help others to apply God’s Word to their life.” This statement was designed as a companion to the previous one. What one hearer assumes or thinks about the response of another hearer is not very useful data to gather. But it is interesting to see how the response to this statement correlates to that of the previous. Table 4.1 shows the response to Statement Four and Table 4.2 places that data beside responses to Statement Three.

In Table 4.2 we see the “agree” and “disagree” clusters⁵ in response to Statements Three and Four. This data, together with an examination of individual response cards, indicates, unsurprisingly, that those who found the stories helpful for themselves were likely to think they would be helpful to others. What is more interesting is the response of those “disagreeing.” Those who did not find the stories helpful for themselves rated the value of the stories even more

⁵ I use the word “cluster” to describe the aggregate of those agreeing or disagreeing in any degree.

negatively when thinking about their potential value for others.

Table 4.1. Response to Statement Four by Percentage

Raw Numbers as a Percentage						
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Strongly Agree	25.0%	21.4%	36.4%	50.0%	32.6%	32.5%
Agree	37.5%	40.5%	25.5%	32.6%	34.9%	37.5%
Somewhat Agree	25.0%	23.8%	16.4%	4.3%	11.6%	15.0%
No Opinion	4.7%	4.8%	14.5%	8.7%	11.6%	5.0%
Somewhat Disagree	1.6%	0.0%	1.8%	2.2%	2.3%	2.5%
Disagree	1.6%	4.8%	3.6%	2.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Strongly Disagree	3.1%	2.4%	0.0%	0.0%	4.7%	5.0%
No Answer	1.6%	2.4%	1.8%	0.0%	2.3%	2.5%

Table 4.2. Statements Three and Four, Agrees v. Disagrees by Percentage

Comparison of Statements 3 and 4						
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
3. Helpful to Me (Agree)	89.10%	78.60%	87.30%	87%	79.10%	85%
4. Helpful to Others (Agree)	87.50%	85.70%	78.20%	87%	79.10%	85%
3. Helpful to Me (Disagree)	4.70%	11.90%	5.50%	6.50%	9.30%	5%
4. Helpful to Others (Disagree)	6.30%	7.10%	16.40%	8.70%	14%	7.50%

While this data may suggest something about human nature in general, it clearly indicates that some who listened to my sermon stories did not find them valuable even with what I will call a “second-party” view. I would have guessed that a listener, who is not personally finding value in a sermonic experience, would think that others other in the community – second-parties – might be finding value in it. If the uninterested hearer has that view about others, he or she would then be more receptive to the use of stories in sermons. If, as the responses suggest, there is no appreciation for this approach even in view of others, it invites some further investigation of that minority of hearers.

It might be beneficial for a community of hearers, like those at St. John’s, to reflect on the

multiple ways that different people hear and learn. Statement Four could have been a suggestion that others might find value where we did not. Since respondents tended to project their own assumptions and feelings on others, the results demonstrate how difficult it is to appreciate the idea others may find value where we do not. Later, when one of my small group interviewees said they would want this type of sermonic approach every Sunday, it was evidence that the same prejudice toward our own preferred sermonic approach is equally strong on the other side.

Statement Five

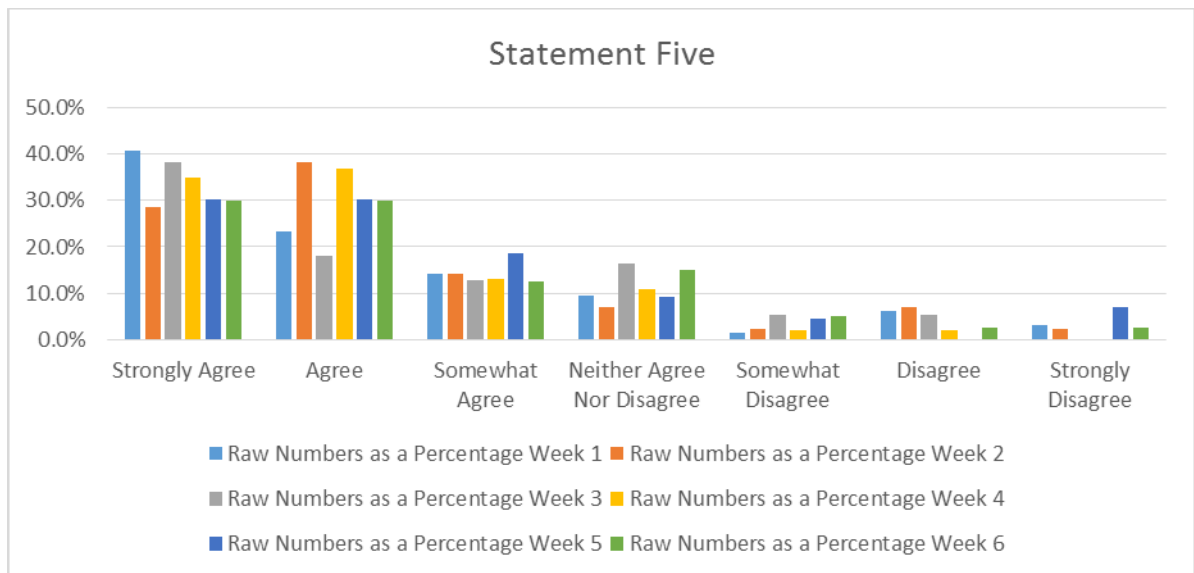
“Today’s sermon story helped me to think about something in a different way.” This statement is similar to Statement Three which was about the sermon’s ability to connect the Word of God to the hearer’s life. However, the nuance is somewhat different here. First, this statement removes the connection with the hearer’s “own life” and looks at more general impressions and thoughts. And second, this statement looks at the general value of the sermon without requiring the hearer to judge its effectiveness in explicating a particular text or theme. That is, unlike Statement Three, it does not ask about the sermon’s connection to the particular Word of God under consideration.

Table 5.1. Response to Statement Five by Percentage

Raw Numbers as a Percentage						
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Strongly Agree	40.6%	28.6%	38.2%	34.8%	30.2%	30.0%
Agree	23.4%	38.1%	18.2%	37.0%	30.2%	30.0%
Somewhat Agree	14.1%	14.3%	12.7%	13.0%	18.6%	12.5%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	9.4%	7.1%	16.4%	10.9%	9.3%	15.0%
Somewhat Disagree	1.6%	2.4%	5.5%	2.2%	4.7%	5.0%
Disagree	6.3%	7.1%	5.5%	2.2%	0.0%	2.5%
Strongly Disagree	3.1%	2.4%	0.0%	0.0%	7.0%	2.5%
No Answer	1.6%	0.0%	3.6%	0.0%	0.0%	2.5%

As with the previous statements, the response here was strongly weighted toward “agree.” However, with this statement being unmoored from the more stringent standards of Statement Three, I had expected an even stronger affirmative response. Instead, the response was more muted. The agreement was less strong. And the number of those giving a “neutral” response to this statement was even greater than for Statement Three. In fact, no statement generated more neutral responses than this one. Table 5.2 offers a visible representation of that higher than usual “neutral” response.

Table 5.2. Response to Statement Five, Agrees v. Disagrees



The data in Table 5.3 shows that in every week the percentage of those “strongly agreeing” with Statement Five was significantly lower than those “strongly agreeing” with Statement Three. The only exception is in Week One when the figures are the same. Similarly, in four out of the six weeks the “neutral” responses are higher when comparing the same statements. Indeed, on Weeks One, Three, and Six the percentage of “neutrals” is double or more.

Table 5.3. Statements Three and Five, Neutral and Strongly Agree

"Neutral" as a Percentage						
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Statement 3	4.7%	7.1%	7.3%	6.5%	11.6%	7.5%
Statement 5	9.4%	7.1%	16.4%	10.9%	9.3%	15.0%
"Strongly Agree" as a Percentage						
Statement 3	40.6%	31.0%	47.3%	47.8%	44.2%	37.5%
Statement 5	40.6%	28.6%	38.2%	34.8%	30.2%	30.0%

I believe that my wording of this question was unhelpful. I was attempting to gauge the overall value of my sermon stories for my hearers while removing the stipulation that they be judged as good illustrators of a particular text. However, by using the phrase “think about something in a different way,” I believe I was inadvertently asking if my hearers had experienced some new revelation, an “Aha! Moment,” during the sermon. Such experiences, I expect, are relatively rare.

The fact that relatively more respondents indicated that the sermon “helped me apply God’s Word to my life” (Statement Three) than those who indicated thinking about something “in a new way” (Statement Five) underlines the value of affirmation in preaching. Sermons do not always need to provide new insights. They have value when they confirm old ones as well. They have value when they connect God’s people to His Word.

Statement Six

“Today’s sermon story helped to make the Bible’s teaching relevant for life today.” With this statement we return to the core issues under consideration in my MAP. Did my recurring characters help to connect God’s people to God’s Word? And did that dynamic prove increasingly effective over time? As such, Statement Six is another variation on Statement Three and I expected to see similar patterns in response. This statement also employs a word I am

normally reticent to use – the word “relevant.”⁶

Table 6.1 reports some of the highest percentages of those who “strongly agreed” and some of the lowest percentages of those who “strongly disagreed.” The stories were indeed relevant. Although the responses did not track exactly with Statement Tree, as Table 6.3 shows, the variance week to week does not seem to indicate any trend.

Table 6.1. Response to Statement Six by Percentage

Raw Numbers as a Percentage						
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Strongly Agree	34.4%	33.3%	41.8%	50.0%	37.2%	50.0%
Agree	39.1%	35.7%	16.4%	26.1%	25.6%	27.5%
Somewhat Agree	12.5%	19.0%	16.4%	13.0%	11.6%	10.0%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	6.3%	2.4%	14.5%	6.5%	14.0%	2.5%
Somewhat Disagree	1.6%	0.0%	1.8%	4.3%	4.7%	0.0%
Disagree	3.1%	9.5%	5.5%	0.0%	2.3%	2.5%
Strongly Disagree	3.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	4.7%	5.0%
No Answer	0.0%	0.0%	3.6%	0.0%	0.0%	2.5%

⁶ In my view, the value judgment of “relevancy” is overused in the church today. It has become a way of dismissing established teachings and practices out of hand. It can too easily change the focus from one of being faithful to the Lord and His Word to a focus on “what works for me.” In this case, however, I found the question of relevancy an important value to measure precisely because I wanted to know if this approach “worked” for my hearers.

Table 6.2. Response to Statement Six, Week-to-Week Trends

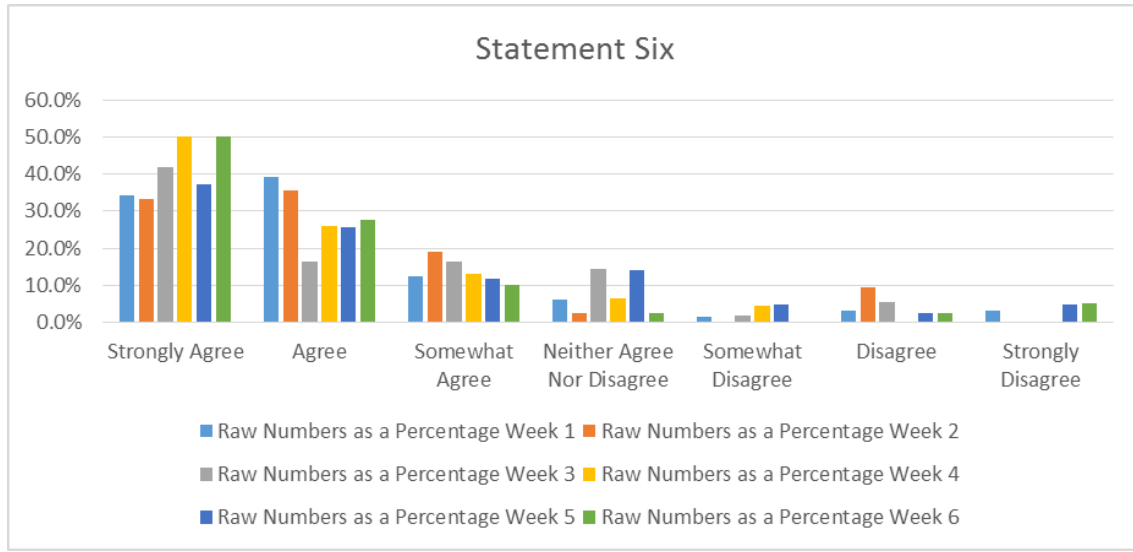


Table 6.3. Statements Three and Six, Agrees and Disagrees by Percentage

Comparison of Statements 3 and 6						
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
3. Helped to Apply (Agree Group)	89.1%	78.6%	87.3%	87.0%	79.1%	85.0%
6. Relevant (Agree Group)	85.9%	88.1%	74.5%	89.1%	74.4%	87.5%
3. Helped to Apply (Disagree Group)	4.7%	11.9%	5.5%	6.5%	9.3%	5.0%
6. Relevant (Disagree Group)	7.8%	9.5%	7.3%	4.3%	11.6%	7.5%

Table 6.3 depicts the response to the central-most statements on the congregational response cards. They indicate the effectiveness of my sermon series with recurring characters over time. The data indicates that the sermons of Weeks One, Four, and Six were slightly more effective in relating bible truths for “my life” (Statement Three) and in having relevance for “life today” (Statement Six). These were the sermons on Wisdom, Key of David, and King of Nations. Each of these sermons scored in the eightieth percentile in both Statement Three and Six.

Table 6.3 also indicates that the weakest of the series was the Week Five sermon on the theme Dayspring. This sermon scored only in the seventies in response to both statements. In my

own view Dayspring was one of the most powerful of the series, where Ray discusses the death of his wife Helen. It is, however, the only sermon where the primary teaching was done by Lana and not Ray. Whether this change in the usual pattern was the reason for the difference in response cannot be known.

Over all, it appears that there was strong appreciation for the storied approach that I was using. Most people were finding significant value in it. But again there does not appear to be a consistent trend indicating a growing appreciation for the characters or this sermonic approach. The variation week to week seems instead to track the perceived quality or applicability of that weeks' particular sermon.

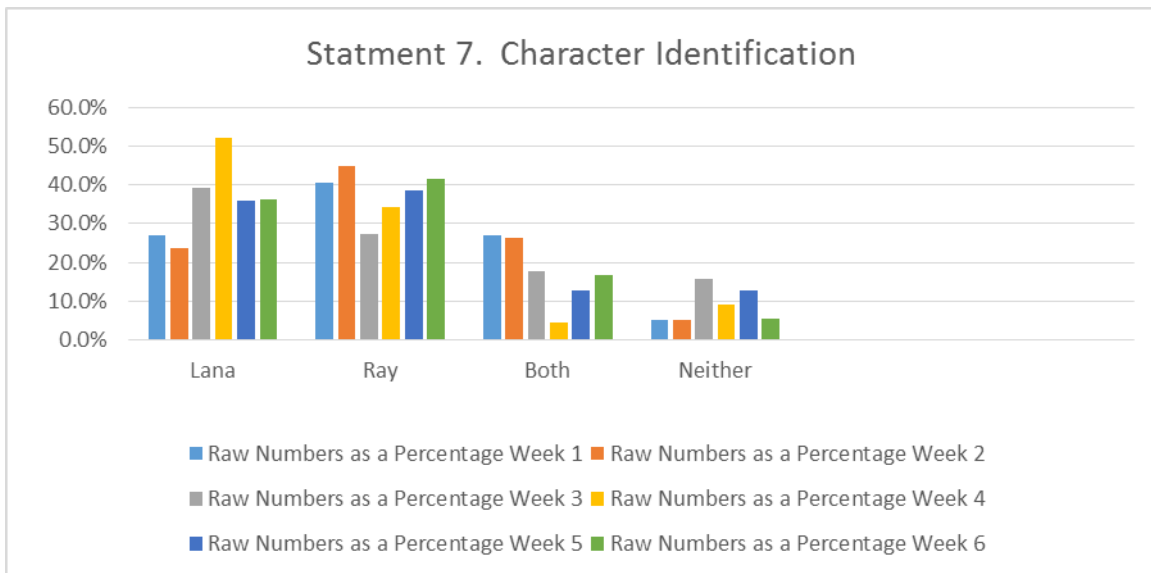
Statement Seven

“In today’s sermon story I identified most with...” This final statement, unlike the others, did not supply a Likert scale for the respondents. There were only four possible answers: Lana; Ray; Both; or Neither. This statement sprang in part from my curiosity about the congregation’s response to these individuals I had presented. Would people like Ray and Lana and connect with them? More importantly, the response to this question would help me to evaluate the more central statements. If I had created characters that were unlikeable or with whom my hearers could not relate, then my other measurements would be adversely affected. I wanted to see the value of recurring characters, and repeat performances by unlikable performers is not a path toward success.

Table 7.1. Response to Statement Seven by Percentage

Raw Numbers as a Percentage						
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Lana	27.1%	23.7%	39.2%	52.3%	35.9%	36.1%
Ray	40.7%	44.7%	27.5%	34.1%	38.5%	41.7%
Both	27.1%	26.3%	17.6%	4.5%	12.8%	16.7%
Neither	5.1%	5.3%	15.7%	9.1%	12.8%	5.6%

Table 7.2. Statement Seven, Character Identification Week-to-Week



As the numbers show, Ray and Lana were very well received. If there was a contest between them, and there wasn't, then more people tended to identify with Ray. This may be because he was similar in age to more of my hearers. Ray scores the highest in four out of the six weeks, the central Weeks Three and Four being the only instances where identification with Lana outpaces that with Ray. In Week Three, the Root of Jesse, Lana talks about losing her job and her experience of hopelessness. And in Week Four, the Key of David, Lana powerfully receives assurance of God's love and forgiveness for Jesus' sake. On that Fourth Week a clear majority of 52% identified with Lana in her experience of forgiveness and renewal.

Whether my respondents chose Ray or Lana or both was not as significant as the evidence that the vast majority found at least one character to connect with each week. The fluctuations in identification are not reflective of a changing audience week to week. The individuals who attend worship at St. John's are a pretty consistent group. Instead the changes in identification appear to be related to the particular storied experience of each particular week. And again with this statement we see no evidence of a growing trend of appreciation by identification. The initial week and the final week are essentially tied.

An examination of the response cards of those who indicated no identification with one or both of the characters revealed something interesting. We might expect that those who identified with neither Ray nor Lana would express having a negative experience in hearing these sermons. To the contrary, among those who expressed a "non-neutral" answer to Statement Three, more than half gave a response in the "agree" cluster. That is, even though they did not identify with Ray or Lana they still found value in the sermon stories in applying God's Word to their own lives. The numbers of these respondents was quite small so no definitive statements may be made. However, that group which still found value in the stories may be an expression of what Chapter 3 described as an "interested party response" to narrative.⁷

Additional Comments

The weekly response cards did not ask for any additional comments from my hearers, nor was there much room available to write them. The fact that a few individuals took the time and effort to squeeze a comment into the margins is a sign of their real passion to provide some measure of feedback beyond what I was asking of them.⁸ There are thirteen comments in total. I

⁷ Page 37.

⁸ The complete list of comments are included in Appendix C.

would characterize two as being neutral in tenor, four as positively affirming the sermons, and seven as expressing a negative reaction. One person who expressed mildly negative response did so in the context of a compliment. They wrote, “I love ‘stories’ but after hearing your “straight up” sermons I have come to truly find them more powerful.” This is something that was echoed later by some of my interviewees. Another person, who expressed a positive response, seemed to validate my theory about the value of having recurring characters. “Today I got it – Lana and Ray finally clicked – it took more than one for me too.”

A number of the sharpest negative comments expressed on the cards, including the one word response “boring,” were from one individual. I know this only because this person chose to make themselves and their comments known. On the cards that they identified, by comment, as their own, this person also demonstrated consistent “strong disagreement” on the Likert Scale responses. This respondent was not, as one might expect, a person opposed to my ministry but someone with whom I had a strong pastoral relationship. I was curious.

I asked my advisor if it might be acceptable, with this person’s blessing, to include a conversation with this person as a component of my research. My advisor agreed. The result of that conversation was, in brief, that when I so radically changed my preaching style I had, to this person, enacted a breach of trust. In my brief time at St. John’s this individual had become quite receptive to my preaching, feeling as if my sermons were really connecting. The storied form of the series broke that sense of connection and that individual’s strong negative responses were an affirmation of my more typical sermons.

One more “comment” on this sermon series came in the form of a gift. Shortly after the first sermon in which Ray talks about his unworn copy of the Bible, an anonymous person left a stuffed bear in my office with an unsigned note. The note thanked me for the message and the

encouragement to be in the Word. The stuffed bear they left was holding a sign that read, “A Bible that is falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn’t.”

One-on-One Interviews

Before the sermon series began, eight brave individuals agreed to sit down with me for a one-on-one conversation when the series had run its course.⁹ These conversations served primarily to help me interpret and characterize the data received on the response cards. These conversations also provided pastoral insight into the experiences of my hearers, not only in this series but beyond. They were also a source of helpful thoughts about potential future applications for this sermonic approach.

I will share some of the other insights I gained by these interviews when I discuss contributions to my ministry and recommendations for future study in the next chapter. At this time, however, I will direct my attention to the central questions of this project. Did my sermons using recurring characters prove to be a significant aid in helping God’s people at St. John’s connect to the Word of God to their lives? And second, was there any specific benefit to using recurring characters that would be demonstrated in a trend over time?

A Significant Aid

It wasn’t necessary to conduct interviews to determine that the sermon series with Ray and Lana were received as being beneficial by the vast majority of respondents. No less than 76.2% of respondents each week, and reaching a high of 87.5%, indicated that the sermon stories helped them to understand the theme being considered (Statement One). No less than 78.6% and up to

⁹ The guiding questions that facilitated these conversations can found in Appendix G. The same appendix provides representative responses to those questions from each participant.

89.1% of respondents indicated that the sermon story helped them to apply God’s Word to their own life (Statement Three). And no less than 74.4%, and reaching a high of 89.1% of respondents, indicated that the sermon story helped to make the Bible’s teachings relevant for life today (Statement Six).

The individuals I interviewed confirmed those findings by their own personal affirmations. I received comments like, “They really brought the lesson to life.”¹⁰ And “I really connected with both of the characters and what I was learning through them through what you were trying to teach – the theme.”¹¹ And again, “Even though I take away something every Sunday from the sermon, I felt I took away more from the Ray and Lana series, just because it was everyday stuff that you could relate to.”¹²

Some of those I spoke with expressed a preference for stories directly from the Bible, and who can fault them? But others remarked how the stories I told in a contemporary context were beneficial in bridging what is sometimes a perceived divide between biblical teaching and daily life. C said, “I think putting it into today’s context helps people in relating God’s Word to their situation and it’s hard for people sometimes to [do that].”¹³ And H offered, “Any of these characters could be your neighbor or could be you. But if it was [a] biblical [story] you might [think], ‘This is just a story.’”¹⁴

One of the indicators of Ray and Lana’s success as teaching tools was the way in which

¹⁰ Subject A. Response to Question 1. (All interview subjects were assigned a letter corresponding to the order in which they were interviewed. These are the same letter assignments indicated in Appendix G where more complete replies to each question can be found.)

¹¹ Subject G. Response to Question 1.

¹² Subject E. Response to Question 4.

¹³ Subject C. Response to Question 8.

¹⁴ Subject H. Response to Question 8.

people identified with them. Statement Seven probed the level of identification directly. But some of the responses in my interviews came about organically. When I asked if the type of sermons I delivered in the series were more or less helpful in applying God’s Word to people’s daily lives, many of the affirmative responses spoke of identification with the characters. One said, “What impacted me most was being able to see things through Lana’s eyes.”¹⁵ Another said, “Where Lana talks about, ‘how can she be forgiven?’ ... That one touched me because maybe there’s where I am at in my walk.”¹⁶ Speaking about Ray, one individual said, “I saw this guy as a man who lived with some regrets ... and I could relate to that.”¹⁷ And another spoke about one of the sermons that was impactful for them. “The one about Ray losing his wife was powerful for me. Maybe it’s because that’s where I’m at in my life.”¹⁸ Further, in response to another question, one respondent expressed his identification with the characters saying, “I wasn’t sure if you knew about *me* or what.”¹⁹ And finally, Subject G reported seeing an elderly woman reacting to the sermon stories. “I saw tears running down her face, and I’m like, ‘okay, so it’s connecting to her as well.’”²⁰

The ability of the stories I shared to draw people into their world was especially evident when I asked those I interviewed to tell me what Ray and Lana looked like. I had gone out of my way not to describe either of them in any detail. Height, build, hair color, eye color, race and other identifying qualities were left fully to my hearer’s imaginations. It was not surprising that

¹⁵ Subject A. Response to Question 2.

¹⁶ Subject G. Response to Question 2.

¹⁷ Subject C. Response to Question 2.

¹⁸ Subject F. Response to Question 2.

¹⁹ Subject B. Response to Question 5. Emphasis mine.

²⁰ Subject G. Response to Question 2.

every one of those I talked with had at least some picture in their mind for each.²¹ Sometimes those images conformed to my own, sometimes they did not, but they were all “real” and valid images. It was another indicator of how people were able to participate in these stories and make them their own.

Statement Six on the response card inquired about the sermons’ relevance for life today and a significant percentage responded to that statement in the affirmative. While the word “relevant” did not surface in any of my interviews, an associated concept surfaced, unprompted, more than a dozen different times. Those I interviewed indicated how they and others were able to “relate” to Ray and Lana in their life journey. This identification with Ray and Lana in their spiritual walk is the key component in their relevance as tools for teaching.

When asked about whether the sermon series had succeeded in its goal of helping people to apply the Word of God to their personal lives, the responses were all affirmative to some degree. One individual said, “A couple times I thought you were directly relating to me.”²² Another said, “For me the benefit to anyone was to [see] that the Bible still holds wisdom and guidance for how we are to live our lives.”²³ And another said plainly that these sermons were, “more successful than normal. They were better than normal – just being honest.”²⁴

While it seems a given that this storied approach was of significant benefit, that conclusion should be qualified by the observation that this is not the only beneficial approach to preaching. Different individuals are likely find different approaches to have benefit for them. We are reminded that a small minority of those filling out response cards each week did not indicate any

²¹ See the responses to Question 14 in Appendix G.

²² Subject B. Response to Question 13.

²³ Subject D. Response to Question 13.

²⁴ Subject H. Response to Question 13.

benefit from this sermonic approach. In addition, a few of those I interviewed, even though they derived benefit from the serialized-story approach, expressed a preference for what I would call my more traditional sermons. “I was relieved when it was over because your sermons in general I find more stimulating and more nourishing.”²⁵ Another person said simply, “Go back to being you.”²⁶

In summary, there is definitive evidence that this project was dramatically successful in its primary objective of having recurring characters serve as tools for communicating God’s truth at St. John’s. What remains to be determined is whether Ray and Lana, as recurring characters, were beneficial in a unique way *because* of their recurrence.

Other Insights

The one-on-one interviews provided an opportunity to explore more than just the central issues of this project. They were useful forums for discussing a number of things related to my preaching and our parish life. In the following I will share just a couple of those insights which might be of benefit to others.

In the stories I told Ray tells us that his legs don’t work very well. But unlike Ray, the sermon stories which he was part of did have legs that worked. That is to say, the sermon stories lived beyond the immediate moment in which the sermons were delivered. They were thought about and talked about. I suspect that much of what I, and other preachers, say from the pulpit is almost immediately forgotten.²⁷ When, however, the sermon becomes fodder for discussions in

²⁵ Subject D. Response to Question 4.

²⁶ Subject F. Response to Question 15.

²⁷ This is not to say that the Word proclaimed was not valuable. I have often heard the analogy to eating: We eat many meals that we do not remember but their forgotten status does not mean they were of no value to us. Without those meals sustaining our body we would have perished. So sermons, even when forgotten, have value when they are received. However, just as there are those few meals that live our memories, there are sermons that have a more lasting quality as well.

the church basement or at the family dinner table, this seems a highly desirable circumstance. Serialized sermon stories with recurring characters, such as I told, proved a useful way of inviting that dynamic.

One person that I spoke with volunteered, “Within my family we talked about them. It was interesting hearing what [spouse] said about them, versus [child], versus me.”²⁸ Another said about their own family, “We talked about them every week and all of it was good.”²⁹ Still another shared, “You would actually hear people talk about the two characters after church when normally they wouldn’t even talk about the sermon at all unless you used a prop or something.”³⁰ There are unanswered questions about how these conversations might have deepened people’s application of the biblical concepts in the sermon, but this dynamic of talking about the sermons is an encouraging sign.

Another insight related to my research that came to the surface in my interviews centered on the length of the sermon series. I shared the stories of Ray and Lana over six consecutive Sundays. That’s a considerable amount of time to devote to one particular kind of preaching, especially one that is less familiar to many ears. Even when they expressed appreciation for this approach, most of those I spoke with felt that six weeks was a little long. Most suggested a series of three or four sermons would be a preferable time frame.³¹ This would allow the preacher to establish characters and to create the effect of an ongoing story.

Since the percentages of those who found benefit in my stories remained relatively steady throughout the series, it seems safe to say that Ray and Lana had not yet worn out their welcome.

²⁸ Subject F. Response to Question 5.

²⁹ Subject A. Response to Question 6.

³⁰ Subject H. Response to Question 6.

³¹ See the responses to Question 11 in Appendix G.

I can see, however, that six consecutive weeks might have taxed some of my hearers. In another context and in the future I would lean, as my hearer's suggested, toward having no more than four in this kind of series. It also seems reasonable to assume that once characters have become established in a congregation's experience, they could reappear, even for a singular occasion, and still have the benefit of being familiar.

The Value of Recurring Characters

As I noted earlier the results here were less definitive than I expected. I had looked to see a distinct trend from the weekly response cards indicating a growing identification with Ray and Lana and a corresponding connection with the message being shared with them. Instead it appears that those who connected with my stories in this series either did so immediately and continued to derive benefit from them through the series, or they did not find value in my stories and did not throughout the series. Again, as noted earlier, there is a very slight trend among those who "agree" that these stories helped them to apply God's Word to their lives toward an increasing level of agreement. This mini-trend, as I would call it, is not sizeable enough to say anything with certainty. It was here that some of the comments which surfaced in my one-on-one interviews were particularly helpful.

One of the questions in my interviews addressed this issue point blank. Question 9, the most lengthy and detailed question of all, asked:

Ray and Lana were repeating characters that we came to know over a period of weeks. Although the stories were inter-related across the six weeks, they were largely stand-alone stories. It would have been possible to tell the same kind of stories using different characters each week. Do you think there was benefit having the same characters appear week after week?

The responses here were overwhelmingly, "yes." Six out of the eight I interviewed indicated some level of agreement. One gave a clear "no" that the character's familiarity did not impact

their positive response to the stories.³² Another gave a mixed “yes and no” response.³³ But the prevailing positive response was manifestly uncertain. I could hear the uncertainty in the voices and see it in the faces. If I had only those responses to go on I’m not sure if I would be comfortable saying that this project worked in the way that I intended.

It was, however, in other comments from those I interviewed that I saw the confirmation I was looking for. One said, “It kept your attention week to week because you were wondering what was happening next.”³⁴ Others referred to the serialized pattern of the story or noted how the series played out like a soap-opera.³⁵ When asked if there was anything additional they wished to share one took time to share this:

There was one week when something was coming up and I wasn’t sure I was going to get to church. And I remember thinking I have to hear that story; I can’t miss one. And it wasn’t that you had asked me to listen, it’s because I didn’t want to miss that part. And I wanted to get it in person. I didn’t want to get it off the internet, or hear what other people said. I wanted it for me.³⁶

Each of those responses testify to the, at least, subliminal success of having recurring characters. If my hearers identified with Ray and Lana, they had an interest in hearing more about them and were in some way “hooked” on learning more through them.

Perhaps the most telling indicator of the success of my characters’ recurrence came from the same individual who answered flatly “no” to finding benefit in characters that recurred. It didn’t matter, they said, if the characters reappeared or only made singular appearance. It all worked. But in another part of our discussion that person volunteered, “I found myself wanting

³² Subject E. Response to Question 9.

³³ This person was clearly a Lutheran.

³⁴ Subject H. Response to Question 9.

³⁵ Subjects D, F, and G. Responses to Question 1.

³⁶ Subject A. Response to Question 15.

more. I couldn't wait to hear the next saga."³⁷ Aha!

Finally, one person I interviewed spoke frankly about the very dynamic I was trying to find. That person said about the sermon stories, "I didn't love them *at first* because I had too many questions. ...*Toward the end* I really connected with both of the characters and what I was learning through them – through what you were trying to teach – the theme."³⁸ Here is clear evidence of a growing utility for my recurring characters over time.

Conclusion

My conclusion: happy success. Ray and Lana did their job. They connected the saints in Millvale to the truth of God's Word for their lives. Furthermore they seemed to become more useful as they became familiar to my hearers. Some of those I interviewed can't wait for their return, one calling for "a reunion tour."³⁹

³⁷ Subject E. Response to Question 1.

³⁸ Subject G. Response to Question 1. Emphasis added.

³⁹ Subject H. Response to Question 15.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

“I’m finished! And you didn’t think I could do it.”

“Ray, I didn’t say that you couldn’t finish a second piece of pie. I said I thought it was unwise.”

“Well Lana, you may recall me telling you once that I’m not very wise. By the way I think you were right. My gut isn’t feeling that great all of a sudden.”

“Shocker.”

“Changing the subject – how did your recent conversation with your mom go?”

“Well I won’t say it went great but I think we’re starting to make progress. I mean we still don’t agree most of the time but I think we’re starting to understand each other a little better.”

“I’m glad for you. Was Pastor Maxwell there?”

“Not this time. I think he thinks we don’t always need a referee at this point.” Lana got up from her chair and kissed Ray gently on the cheek. “Thank you, Ray.”

“For what?”

“You know... Do you want some more pie?”

“Ugh. You’ve got to be kidding.”

Contributions to Ministry

Over the course of their friendship Ray and Lana have grown in their faith and in their personal lives. At the same time they have proved themselves useful in assisting others to grow in their own lives. They became living canvasses upon which a picture of the Gospel was painted

for God's people to see. And if, to some degree, the people of St. John's are the better for having known these two individuals, I am more so. Ray and Lana have helped me to grow. They have helped me to think more deeply about the intersections where my faith meets my life. They have shown me a new picture of Christian community that breaks down the artificial barriers of age and ability. And they have helped me to communicate God's changeless truths in a new way.

In acknowledging the blessing of knowing Ray and Lana I am, by extension, expressing profound gratitude for the entire experience I have had in the Doctor of Ministry program at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. The wisdom of great authors, the patient guidance and sound teaching of excellent faculty, and the comradery of brothers in ministry have been invaluable in both my academic and pastoral growth.

There is something deeply humbling in being aware of the debt we owe to others. As I near the completion of this program I see that I am standing on the shoulders, not only of prophets and apostles, but on the shoulders of so many others whose inspiration, support, prayers and guidance have attended me on the way. The skills I have honed in these past years are first gifts of the Triune God. To Him I ascribe all glory for whatever achievement or advancement I might claim. Furthermore, the sharpening of those God-given skills has been accomplished under the auspices of men and women more gifted than I. Their willingness to share their insights through writing, teaching and counsel make me a debtor to their generosity.

One of the very special experiences of this endeavor was to be the recipient of so much support from the people in my congregations. This was a boon unlooked-for when I began my studies and is one of the most precious gifts that I will take away from this experience.

When I began the Doctor of Ministry program I was the senior pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church in Sebawaing, Michigan. From day one, the people of Immanuel were stalwart

in their support. They blessed me with gifts of finances and time that enabled me to continue in my studies and they asked after my progress as those concerned for my success. The only reservation they ever expressed, and they expressed it repeatedly, was the fear that having attained a new degree I might leave them for another congregation. I love them for those words and thoughts. In writing this I am not only expressing my gratitude for those dear people, I am pointing to a boon for my pastoral ministry. To have a debt of gratitude and love toward my congregation deepened my relationships among them and furthered my effectiveness in that place.

Two years ago I did accept a call to serve at St. John's Lutheran Church in Millvale, Pennsylvania, which is directly adjacent to the city of Pittsburgh. I can say, with no disrespect to St. John's, for at the time I did not know them, that I did not want to go. I did not want to leave Immanuel. Yet I felt compelled by God to take up this new calling. I came among the people of St. John's as a stranger and with the agreement that they would permit me to complete my studies in the Doctor of Ministry program. They have done far more.

The people of St. John's have been ardent supporters. When I was still new among them they actively participated in my MAP, faithfully filling out response cards and sitting down for interviews. They too have encouraged me and have gifted me with time and financial blessings to complete this work. Even if my project had failed to reveal any effectiveness in my tested approach, the process of the project would have succeeded in other dimensions. It became a shared effort that built relationships and trust that has continuing benefit for our common work and ministry here.

It's interesting to see how Ray and Lana have become, in some ways, members of the congregation. When those two names are invoked together they immediately connect us to the

shared six-week experience that we had at St. John's. Even those who were not fans of the original stories will smile at the memory of their patience in the ordeal. And when Ray stopped in one Sunday a few months after the series ended, it was my distinct impression that he was welcomed.

In our busy and fractured society one of the big missing pieces is just that kind of shared experience which builds community. By working together to support me in my program; by hearing a memorable series of sermons together as a group; and by sharing in conversations and responses around those sermons, St. John's was strengthened in the process.

Beyond the communal value of this enterprise, there was also the valuable individual experiences that so many had in hearing the stories of Ray and Lana. As they struggled with issues of faith, friendship and life and as they were shaped by God's powerful Word, it touched hearts. It opened minds. It made a difference in people's lives.

Contributions to Personal and Professional Growth

Just by proposing it, the project I designed showed a measure of growth in my ministry, in particular in my preaching. For most of my pastorate I have had a very uncertain relationship with sermon stories. I loved biblical stories but I had serious reservations about any other kind. To me, sermon stories seemed like moments of entertainment that preachers used to prop up a dull sermon. I was thoroughly steeped in what I would call a Modernistic approach to preaching.

Even on those occasions when I did reference a biblical story in my preaching, or on rare occasion an extra-biblical story, that story was generally used as an example. "This looks like the idea I am trying to convey." The idea that stories might embody biblical concepts and teach inductively was alien to my thought. The power of story to subvert our defenses and engage us on levels beyond intellect was unknown to me.

My proposal for this project came after spending years in a program where I gained a new appreciation for stories. My professors were men of great scholarship who had an evident fidelity to the Lutheran Confessions. My trust in them opened my mind to consider possibilities that I hadn't before considered. Author/preachers like Fred Craddock, Thomas Long, and Barbra Brown Taylor employed a homiletic that not only used stories in powerful ways that were new to me, they showed me sermons that were narrative in approach even when they were not telling stories.

It would be wrong to say that some of my initial reticence does not still exist. I am converted but not completely. That means the project I designed was meant to be a challenge for me. It caused me to lean upon an approach I might eschew and to do so for an extended period of time. The results of this project, not only objectively in the data received, but subjectively in my own experience, have strengthened my relationship with narrative preaching. It made me grow as a preacher and a pastor and it has evoked courage for continued growth as well.

As a result of my studies and the work on this MAP, I now step into the pulpit with more confidence. I have more tools to employ my craft and I have more mastery in using them. I have learned to distinguish between Law *and* Gospel preaching and Law *then* Gospel preaching. And not only is my preaching the better for this work, the relationships within the congregation through this work have made me a better pastor.

Recommendations

I would, and I have, recommended the Doctor of Ministry program to any pastor who has been in the field for a more than a few years. After a new pastor has laid a foundation of ministry experience he is a better student. He will be in a position to make new connections between the classroom and the parish. He will also benefit greatly from the ministry insight gained from

others who are serving in diverse settings.

As I would encourage pastors to further their education and expand their horizons, I would also encourage congregations to support them in this endeavor. I have reported how I was blessed by the support of two loving congregations. And it is not out of bounds to say that as they blessed me, they were blessed in return. First, they found themselves with a pastor who was more apt to preach. Second, and perhaps more significantly, they had deepened a relationship with their pastor by being partners in my project. Those deepened relationships have a way of bearing fruit in many and unexpected ways.

Where to Go From Here

In view of the particular project that I undertook, I see opportunities for future use of this project in my own ministry and that of others. Not only does it seem likely that Ray and Lana will reappear in future sermons, it seems likely that other recurring characters might appear as well. As one of my interviewees suggested I might “mix it up” and introduce a new character with a different demographic or I could create a new world altogether.¹

A part of St. John’s outreach to our community is our preschool. Perhaps a couple juvenile characters could be created who might have a recurring role in the stories that are told there. These characters could serve not only to teach and model the faith, but identification with them might help students to deal with their own struggles and to empathize with others.

A pastor of another church would not have to be the next Garrison Keillor in order to introduce a cast of recurring characters in his preaching. Creating just two real-life contemporary characters could provide an opportunity to explore God’s Word in a different way. It might also

¹ Subject B. Response to Question 9.

present the opportunity to discuss uncomfortable truths in a less threatening way. I would simply encourage making a beginning. And with that I would encourage reading some of the previously mentioned masters of the craft.

For any pastor, whatever their sermonic approach might be, I would recommend seeking feedback from people in the congregation. My project created a structured way of receiving feedback from people in the congregation. Although I didn't like everything I heard, it was beneficial for me to hear what others were hearing and how they were hearing it. I would not recommend using weekly response cards, which would become burdensome. Occasional use may prove insightful however. But far more helpful were the one-on-one interviews that I conducted. Here the responses were more detailed and nuanced and, consequently, more useful. It would be wise for any pastor to establish some kind of forum for feedback about his sermons. This forum might be interviews, such as I conducted, or a small panel representative of the congregation.

In addition to future ministry opportunities from this project, there are also opportunities for further academic inquiry by myself or by others. Most specifically, there is a need for further investigation into the value of recurring characters. Very little has been written about this and I have only scratched the surface. It would be interesting to devise some way of testing recurring characters against "one-off" characters over time. Perhaps a pastor with two Sunday services might measure one against the other by telling essentially the same stories in both, one service in which the characters recur, and one where they change.

We need to remember that minority that, at least in my project, did not find much benefit in the stories I was telling. Since narrative thinking and storytelling are so much a part of our humanity, it would be interesting to explore further these "non-story" people. Perhaps it is the

case, as I would guess, that there are other kinds of stories that might connect better with these individuals. Or it could be that they are so adept at integrating biblical thought and material into their own life story that other stories seem either incongruous or superfluous. More study is needed.

One of the questions that occurred to me in the course of my research was about sermon retention. Some of those I interviewed could remember something from the non-storied portion of the sermons I preached. Many could not. All of them remembered key aspects of the story of Ray and Lana. The easy conclusion to reach is that stories have a staying power that mere information does not. However, it would be interesting to explore exactly *what* of value is retained after some time has passed. That Ray and Lana are remembered is not necessarily evidence that the biblical truths they were teaching are also remembered. That would be worthy of some further exploration.

Conclusion

Two thousand years ago, on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit caused the Word of Christ to be heard in a miraculous way, so that each person could hear it “in his own native language” (Acts 2:8). By the same Holy Spirit, that Word of Christ is being proclaimed today in all the world—even in Millvale, Pennsylvania. Just as then, the Spirit imbues that Word with power that connects men and women to the world’s only Savior. And just as then, the Spirit is able to use men of little consequence to proclaim that life-giving Word in such a way that all everyone can hear it.

Sermon stories are both ancient and new. I count them as one of the most useful tools in my homiletical toolbox. They are nearly unmatched in their ability to communicate God’s Word heart to heart and life to life. I am grateful for the opportunity I was given to become newly

acquainted with this very old tool. I know that many who heard the stories about Ray and Lana felt that in those stories I was speaking their language.

I write the final sentence of this report with gratitude to God and His people, and with a desire for further growth in ministry and preaching as the Lord allows.

S. D. G.

APPENDIX A

CORRESPONDENCE WITH THE CONGREGATION

1. *Church Newsletter, November 2015*

I Need Your Help

Here's the short story: I need you to give me some feedback on a series of sermons that I will deliver in November and December. I'm asking you to take a moment to fill out an anonymous response card each week for six weeks (or as often as you are present). These responses will help me with my final project in attaining my Doctor of Ministry degree.

Here's the longer story: Several years ago with the support of Immanuel in Sebewaing, Michigan I began work through Concordia Seminary in St. Louis to earn a Doctor of Ministry Degree in Homiletics (preaching). My course work involved reading many books and writing many papers and making at least one annual trip to the seminary campus for intensive class sessions that met each weekday for two weeks. My classwork was completed before I arrived here at St. John's and what remains for me to accomplish is something called a Major Applied Project (MAP). This MAP is a project that needs to be carried out within the life of our congregation, and it's something I need your help to accomplish.

When I was considering the call to serve here at St. John's I informed the call committee that I would be working on this and that I would need their support in completing this final piece. I was pleased to receive assurance of that support and now, having gotten to know you, I am all the more assured of it.

What am I asking for? Nothing too difficult, only as I mentioned above that you would take a few moments over the course of six Sundays to fill out a simple response card about that Sunday's sermon. A few of you have been, or will be, asked to provide a little bit more feedback but for almost everybody else that's all I'm looking for, just a few circled numbers on a response card each week that you're here. And I'm asking you to be honest. Don't worry about padding your responses to be nice to me; I won't get a better grade if I get better responses. Write down what you really think/feel. The cards are all anonymous.

As I said, my studies have been on the subject of preaching, which means that my project will be conducted from the pulpit. Beginning Sunday, November 15 and running through December 20 I will deliver a series of sermons under the theme "Come Lord Jesus". The theme of Christ's coming to deliver us (whether at His birth or at His glorious return) is the common thread that unites the final Sundays of our Church Year with the Sundays of Advent. Each Sunday we will think about the coming Savior under one of the titles that He is given by the ancient "O Antiphons" that are familiar to us through the hymn "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" (LW 31).

During the six Sundays of this series I will be introducing you to two characters whom I have named Lana and Ray. They will be vehicles for us to explore our weekly theme. Right now, all I want you to know about Lana and Ray is that they are not actual individuals; I don't want

anyone to think I'm airing someone's dirty laundry or sharing someone's private stories. You may recognize things about Lana or Ray in others or in yourself but they are not direct copies of any individual persons, rather they are composites of many, many ordinary people.

I thank you so much for your help in this endeavor. May our Coming Lord Jesus strengthen you in holy faith and keep you close to Him until the Day of his appearing.
Pastor Hahn

2. *Text of a Bulletin Insert from November 2015*

COME LORD JESUS

O Come, O Come Emmanuel – most Christians know that hymn but many are not aware that the words of that hymn are based on an ancient collection of verses called the “O Antiphons”. These verses were traditionally used in worship on the seven days leading up to Christmas Eve. (See pp. 288—289 of our hymnal)

Each of the “O Antiphons” places our focus on a different title of the coming Messiah and each title is drawn from a different prophecy of Isaiah.

As we close out the present Church Year and begin another Advent season our Sunday themes will be centered on those antiphons:

15 Nov.	Come O Wisdom (our Teacher)
22 Nov.	Come O Adonai (our Lord)
29 Nov.	Come O Root of Jesse (our Hope)
6 Dec.	Come O Key of David (our Redeemer)
13 Dec.	Come O Dayspring (our Joy)
20 Dec.	Come O King of Nations (our Peace)
24 Dec.	Come O Emmanuel (our God with Us)

This series of sermons is part of my work in the Doctor of Ministry program through Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. There will be a short answer questionnaire in your bulletin each Sunday concerning that day's sermon. I thank you ahead of time for your help in completing these. — Pastor Hahn

APPENDIX B

TEXTS, TITLES, AND THEMES: THE INITIAL DESIGN OF THE SERIES

November 2015

COME LORD JESUS – STORY OUTLINES

15 Nov. – Come O Wisdom, our Teacher

TEXT: Isaiah 11:2 *The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding.*

What is this sermon saying about Jesus?

Jesus is the incarnation of Wisdom. God's wisdom is most fully seen at the cross.

What is this sermon saying about God's people?

We have no wisdom in ourselves but Christ is our Wisdom.

What key development(s) in Ray and Lana's story will help to share this message?

- Ray expresses his regret that he has been arrogant in life, trusting in himself and not listening to others; this is even true in his relationship with God.
- Ray shares how he has grown more reliant upon God's Wisdom in the Word.
- Lana questions the Wisdom of the cross and Ray responds.

PRAYER: O Wisdom proceeding from the mouth of the Most High, pervading and permeating all creation, mightily ordering all things: Come and teach us the way of prudence.

22 Nov. – Come O Adonai, our Lord

TEXT: Isaiah 11:3b-5 *He shall not judge by what His eyes see, or decide disputes by what His ears hear, but with righteousness He shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and He shall strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of His waist, and faithfulness the belt of His loins.*

What is this sermon saying about Jesus?

Jesus is Lord.

As Lord He rules over all things and will come again to Judge the world.

What is this sermon saying about God's people?

We are accountable to the Lord for our lives.
We can trust in the Lord's mercy in His judgement.

What key development(s) in Ray and Lana's story will help to share this message?

- Lana expresses she feels that others are judging her (mother/congregation); this is one of the reasons she has been avoiding church.
- Ray talks about his fear that he wasn't a good father. Are they judging him?
- Ray affirms Christ's Lordship and His plan for Lana's life and his own.

PRAYER: O Adonai, Ruler of the house of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the burning bush and gave him the Law on Sinai: Come with an outstretched arm and redeem us.

29 Nov. – Come O Root of Jesse, our Hope

TEXT: Isaiah 11:1 *There shall come forth a Shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a Branch from his roots shall bear fruit.*

What is this sermon saying about Jesus?

Jesus is faithful to keep His promises and fulfill His Word.

What is this sermon saying about God's people?

We have real hope in Christ even when all earthly hope is lost.
God's plans for us in Christ are eternal.

What key development(s) in Ray and Lana's story will help to share this message?

- Lana's job is going away; she talks about her future in which she sees nothing hopeful.
- Ray talks about the tree cut off and regrown that he remembers from his grandfather's farm.

PRAYER: O Root of Jesse, standing as an ensign before the peoples, before whom all the kings are mute, to whom the nations to homage: Come quickly to deliver us.

6 Dec. – Come O Key of David, our Redeemer

TEXT: Isaiah 22:22 *And I will place on His shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.*

What is this sermon saying about Jesus?

Jesus sets us free from sin and judgement by His grace.

What is this sermon saying about God's people?

We have sins that would lock us into despair and hell. Christ holds the key to free us.

What key development(s) in Ray and Lana’s story will help to share this message?

- Lana speaks openly about the trouble she got into which led to her visits with Ray.
- Ray shares God’s message of forgiveness in Christ with Lana.

PRAYER: O Key of David and scepter of the house of Israel, You open and no one can close, You close and no one can open: Come and rescue the prisoners who are in darkness and the shadow of death.

13 Dec. – Come O Dayspring, our Joy

TEXT: Isaiah 9:2-3 *The people who walked in darkness, have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation; You have increased its joy.*

What is this sermon saying about Jesus?

Jesus remembers those who experience sorrow and brings His light to them. The darkness surrounding His cross means the sunshine of God’s grace for us.

What is this sermon saying about God’s people?

We have joy in Christ even in the darkest times.

What key development(s) in Ray and Lana’s story will help to share this message?

- Ray reveals his grief at the death of his wife Helen.
- Lana has returned to church and shares the hope that she has found.

PRAYER: O Dayspring, splendor of light everlasting: Come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

20 Dec. – Come O King of Nations, our Peace

TEXT: Isaiah 2:4 *He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.*

What is this sermon saying about Jesus?

Christ brings us perfect peace with God and a foundation for peace with one another.

What is this sermon saying about God’s people?

Sin separates us not only from God but from each other. Christ’s redemption enables us to overcome anger, hurt, suspicion, and jealousy and seek reconciliation with others.

What key development(s) in Ray and Lana’s story will help to share this message?

- Lana resolves to reconcile with her mother.
- Ray picks up the phone to reconcile with his children.

PRAYER: O King of nations, the ruler they long for, the cornerstone uniting all people:

Come and save us all, whom You formed out of clay.

BONUS¹

24 Dec. – Come O Emmanuel, our God with Us

TEXT: Isaiah 7:14 *Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.*

- A surprise visit from Lana.
- Ray Jr. is there – Ray reached out and called him. All this time I've been afraid to tell him that I wanted him around.

PRAYER: O Emmanuel, our king and our Lord, the anointed for the nations and their Savior: Come and save us, O Lord our God.

¹ This sermon was never developed or preached and was never considered a part of the project. The essential story arc was planned to end on December 20. This sermon was labelled a “bonus” since it would be an encore performance for my characters without asking for any congregational feedback. I eliminated this sermon from the series at an early date because of several concerns. 1. The sermon was importing Advent themes into the Church’s chief celebration of Christmas. 2. Many visitors could be expected who would have no prior experience with Ray and Lana and who might justly expect the central sermon story to be the story of the Nativity. 3. Since the sermon was not formally part of my project it might have caused confusion among my small group participants whose feedback I would not be receiving until after the holiday.

APPENDIX C

THE WEEKLY RESPONSE CARD

1. *The Response Card*

The questions posed to the general congregation remained the same each week with only the slight adjustment to identify the date and the particular theme of that Sunday. These are the questions as they appeared on the final Sunday of the series, December 20, 2015.

12/13/15 Come O Dayspring, Our Joy

Please fill in the circle that best represents opinion.

To change a response, place an “X” over the circle you don’t want and choose another.

1. Today’s sermon story with Ray and Lana helped me to see Jesus as the “DAYSPRING”.

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

2. Today’s sermon story with Ray and Lana was “true-to-life”.

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

3. Today’s sermon story helped me to apply God’s Word to my own life.

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

4. Today’s sermon story would likely help others to apply God’s Word in their life.

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

5. Today’s sermon story helped me to think about something in my life in a different way.

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

6. Today’s sermon story helped to make the Bible’s teachings relevant for life today.

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

7. In today’s sermon story I identified most with. (Please circle the answer that best applies.)

Lana Ray Neither Both

Thank you for your help! Please leave this form in one of the boxes provided.

2. *The Responses*

Statement One	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Strongly Agree	21	12	24	17	17	16
Agree	21	13	15	13	11	11
Somewhat Agree	13	7	5	8	5	8
No Opinion	3	5	4	3	3	1
Somewhat Disagree	2	1	5	3	2	1
Disagree	2	1	2	1	1	0
Strongly Disagree	1	2	0	0	2	1
No Answer	1	1	0	1	2	2
Total Answers	64	42	55	46	43	40

Statement Two						
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Strongly Agree	30	15	26	23	19	24
Agree	16	15	14	14	12	11
Somewhat Agree	11	7	7	3	7	1
No Opinion	2	0	2	3	1	1
Somewhat Disagree	1	0	3	0	0	1
Disagree	2	2	3	2	2	0
Strongly Disagree	1	2	0	1	2	1
No Answer	1	1	0	0	0	1
Total Answers	64	42	55	46	43	40

Statement Three						
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Strongly Agree	26	13	26	22	19	15
Agree	20	14	10	16	9	16
Somewhat Agree	11	6	12	2	6	3
No Opinion	3	3	4	3	5	3
Somewhat Disagree	0	1	1	1	1	0
Disagree	2	3	2	1	1	1
Strongly Disagree	1	1	0	1	2	1
No Answer	1	1	0	0	0	1
Total Answers	64	42	55	46	43	40

Statement Four						
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Strongly Agree	16	9	20	23	14	13
Agree	24	17	14	15	15	15
Somewhat Agree	16	10	9	2	5	6
No Opinion	3	2	8	4	5	2
Somewhat Disagree	1	0	1	1	1	1
Disagree	1	2	2	1	0	0
Strongly Disagree	2	1	0	0	2	2
No Answer	1	1	1	0	1	1
Total Answers	64	42	55	46	43	40

Statement Five						
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Strongly Agree	26	12	21	16	13	12
Agree	15	16	10	17	13	12
Somewhat Agree	9	6	7	6	8	5
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	6	3	9	5	4	6
Somewhat Disagree	1	1	3	1	2	2
Disagree	4	3	3	1	0	1
Strongly Disagree	2	1	0	0	3	1
No Answer	1	0	2	0	0	1
Total Answers	64	42	55	46	43	40

Statement Six						
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Strongly Agree	22	14	23	23	16	20
Agree	25	15	9	12	11	11
Somewhat Agree	8	8	9	6	5	4
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	4	1	8	3	6	1
Somewhat Disagree	1	0	1	2	2	0
Disagree	2	4	3	0	1	1
Strongly Disagree	2	0	0	0	2	2
No Answer	0	0	2	0	0	1
Total Answers	64	42	55	46	43	40

Statement Seven						
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Lana	16	9	20	23	14	13
Ray	24	17	14	15	15	15
Both	16	10	9	2	5	6
Neither	3	2	8	4	5	2
Total Answers	59	38	51	44	39	36

3. Comments

Although no space was provided on the card, some chose to leave comments in the margins. Behind each comment, the same person's response to Statements Three [S3] and Seven [S7] are provided as way of reading the comments in context. Statement Three indicated that the sermon story helped the hearer apply God's Word to their life. Statement Seven indicated identification with the characters.

Week One

- If Lana doesn't want to be there why does she go? [S3: Agree. S7: Both]
- [Regarding an identification with Ray.] Maybe because we share the same years. [S3: Somewhat Agree. S7: Ray]
- I have heard you preach several times and (for me) I am really hit by your love of the Word! I was on English teacher and I love "stories" but after hearing your "straight up" sermons I have come to truly find them more powerful. (Hope you don't mind the comment.) [S3: Agree. S7: Both]

Week Two

- The message following the story was great! I guess I'm not a fan of long stories. [S3: Neutral. S7: Both]

Week Three

- Don't care for these. [S3: Disagree. S7: Neither]
- I don't care for the "meat" of the sermon in story form. [S3: Neutral. S7: Both]

Week Four

- Today I got it – Lana and Ray finally clicked – it took more than one for me too. [S3: Strong Agree. S7: Both] [I believe the comment "me too" is in reference to events in the story.]
- Best yet!! [S3: Strong Agree. S7: Both]
- Scripture end of sermon – powerful! [S3: Strong Agree. S7: Both]

Week Five

- Boring. [S3: Strong Disagree. S7: Neither]
- These are too long and I prefer more of a speaking sermon than reading. [S3: Strong Disagree. S7: Neither]

Week Six

- Thank you for making me see things differently. [S3: Neutral. S7: Both]
- Last One! [S3: Strong Disagree. S7: Neither]

APPENDIX D

SMALL GROUP CORRESPONDENCE

1. *Request to be a small group participant. Sent by email October 30, 2015.*

Dear _____,

You are one of only ten people at St. John's who is receiving this communication. I am asking you to take a special role in the Major Applied Project which is part of my studies for the Doctor of Ministry degree. Your contribution will not demand much of your time but it will be of great benefit to me and I hope, by extension, to others.

On the six Sundays from November 15 – December 20 I will be delivering a series of sermons under the theme “Come Lord Jesus.” In our current newsletter I have asked all the members and friends of St. John's to assist me by taking a few moments to complete a short, anonymous questionnaire on each of those Sundays. I hope you will be part of that process.

In addition, I am asking a select group of individuals, including you, to do two additional things:

One, I'm asking you to fill out a slightly more detailed questionnaire after the third sermon in my series is preached (halfway through). This questionnaire may include some short answer responses but nothing too daunting. Your answers will help me assess the effectiveness of the approach I will be using during the sermon series. (Please note that while you will be providing this response at the halfway point, I will not be looking at your responses until after all six of the sermons in my series are preached.)

Two, I'm asking you to sit down with me one-on-one after all six of the sermons have been delivered. This conversation, scheduled at your convenience, will be no more than an hour and during it I'll be asking you for your honest feedback about the sermons as you experienced them.

In order to be part of this I am asking you, if at all possible, to be present on each of the Sundays mentioned above. If there is a Sunday that you have a conflict with you could listen to the audio file of the sermon on our website but “live” is preferable.

Before you agree to participate, you should know that I will not share your name with anyone else. Your identity will not be disclosed by me to others in the congregation, nor in my communications with Concordia Seminary, nor in the final written assessment of this project.

The only thing I will share is your sex, your age, and how long you have been a member of St. John's. On the other hand you are totally free to speak about your involvement in this process with anyone you choose.

That being said, it's obvious that your identity will be known to me. Your response to the questionnaire after the third sermon and the content of our one-on-one conversation, by nature cannot be anonymous to me. Please know that I promise only to be grateful for your feedback, and I ask you only to be honest in your responses.

I will be contacting you shortly to ask if you are able to be part of this process as I have described it. I'll be happy to answer any questions or concerns you may have at that time. Thank you for prayerfully considering this.

May our good and gracious Savior be with you and may He preserve to us His pure and saving Gospel. To Christ be all glory forever.

Pastor Hahn

2. *Note Sent with the Participant Disclosure Form, November 9, 2015.*

I'm very glad that you are able to help me in this sermon project - thank you so much for your willingness! The first sermon in the series will be this coming Sunday - November 15!

I have attached a disclosure form that is designed to fully inform you of the nature of your involvement and the way in which your information will be used. It's may seem a little formal but It's meant to safeguard your rights.

Would you please read the attached form and return a signed copy to me sometime in the next two weeks.

If you have questions or if you can't open the attachment please let me know.

In Christ,
Pr. Hahn

1. *Text of the Disclosure Form*

DISCLOSURE FORM

*Thank you for agreeing to assist me in my research project!
In order that the nature of your participation may be fully disclosed to you, I ask you to please read the statements below. If you understand and agree with those statements please acknowledge the same by signing this document. If you have any questions about your role in this project, please speak with me; I will be glad to answer your questions. I want your participation in this project to be a joy for you and I want all my interactions with you to*

*conform to the highest standards of ethical behavior for a research project of this nature.
The Lord's blessings to you as you hear His Word!*

Pastor Dan Hahn

I, the undersigned, have read and understand the following statements:

1. I agree to be a participant in the research project being conducted by Rev. Daniel Hahn through Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.
2. In addition to responding to the weekly, anonymous surveys that will be distributed to the whole congregation, I am being asked to respond to one (1) additional and more in-depth questionnaire after I have heard the third sermon in the series titled: "Come Lord Jesus."
3. I will also participate in a one-on-one conversation with Pastor Hahn about my experience as a listener to the sermon series titled "Come Lord Jesus". This conversation will be after all six of the sermons have been delivered.
4. I understand that general demographic information about me (my sex, my age, and my years of membership at St. John's) will be included in a written research report to Concordia Seminary. This report will be available to the public through the seminary library.
5. I understand that my name, my address, my personal contact information, and additional personal descriptors (other than those mentioned in the statement above) will never be shared by Pastor Hahn in any written report or in any other communication.
6. I understand that while my personal identity will never be attached to any of my responses, the content of my responses (both to the midpoint questionnaire and the one-on-one conversation) will be shared as part of the written research report to Concordia Seminary.
7. I understand that I am not bound to be confidential; I am at liberty to disclose and discuss my involvement in this project with anyone at any time.
8. I understand that my participation in this project is and remains completely voluntary and that I can discontinue my participation at any time and for any reason.

Signed _____ Date _____

2. Note sent with the Midpoint Questionnaire

To my faithful listeners

I'm sorry that this is getting to you a day later than promised, a phone call yesterday morning changed the trajectory of my day. All is well however.

Attached is a form with some questions for you. I am sorry to burden you with what must seem like homework but I am very appreciative of your willingness to help me in this process.

The Lord be with you in this Advent, directing your hearts and lives in Jesus.

Pr Hahn

3. *Midpoint Questionnaire*

INSTRUCTIONS

The following 7 questions are designed to capture your impressions of the sermon series that you have been listening to now that we have reached the halfway point. I deeply appreciate your honest answers and opinions and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for all your help.

- If I can, I will be glad to clarify any of the questions so don't hesitate to call, text, or email.
- Please note that while longer answers are more helpful it is not necessary to write complete sentences or paragraphs – this is not an essay assignment. (Aren't you glad!)
- If there is a question you want to leave blank – do it.
- You can return this to me by email, in person, or by mail, whatever works for you.
- There is no firm due date for this but if possible work on this before you hear the next sermon.

1. As you grow more familiar with Ray and Lana over time does that growing familiarity help to connect you to the story and to the biblical message? Please offer a little explanation.
2. Has the character Ray helped you to apply or understand the Biblical theme of the sermons? If so how?
3. Has the character Lana helped you to apply or understand the Biblical theme of the sermons? If so how?
4. Compared to more typical sermons, do you think this kind of serialized-story sermon is more helpful; equally helpful; or less helpful in showing how the Bible applies to everyday life?
5. In your opinion, what is “working” about these sermons so far?
6. In your opinion, what isn't working well so far?
7. If you have had a conversation with someone about one of the “Ray & Lana” sermons or overheard a conversation about these sermons, please share something about the nature and content of those conversations if you are able.

APPENDIX E

CHARACTER SKETCHES

1. *Lana's Story*

Illana Perez, or Lana, as she prefers, is 22 years old. She's had a little more than two semesters of secondary education at a nearby community college where she began pursuing a business degree but now is not enrolled, being uncertain of what career to pursue. After discontinuing her studies she found a job as an office helper in a small manufacturing firm. The job not only provides much needed income but she hopes it will give her a sense of how much she really likes that kind of work.

Lana is presently living at home. For a couple of years after high school she lived on and off with her boyfriend. Since their last, apparently final, break up a year ago she has been living with her parents. The situation has sometimes been strained, especially with her mother. Lana knows that her parents love her but she can't help feeling they are disappointed with her. She wishes she was able to afford a life on her own.

Lana's father, a store manager, has very limited interaction with her or even with Lana's mother. He prefers the daily retreat to his lounge chair to watch sports and take naps. On the couple of nights a week that they eat together at the table, he gives short answers to direct questions but almost never begins a conversation or encourages any dialogue to extend beyond a few short exchanges. One good thing that Lana appreciates: if she is home when her father goes to bed at 9:00 pm, he almost always remembers to tell her, "I love you."

Lana's mother is a more difficult case, and it's her disapproval that Lana feels more keenly. Bonnie, who went to work the day after her graduation from high school, can't understand how her daughter could be so lacking in apparent drive and direction. In her own estimation, she tries very hard not to be overly critical, but her mother's continual "helpful suggestions" are almost more than Lana can bear. Sometimes Lana can feel herself willfully rebelling against her mother's wishes. She loves her mom and knows the feeling is mutual, but she has noticed that she tries not to be home alone with her mother.

Not in the house is Lana's younger sister Tammy, 19, who is off for her first year at the state college and is sharing an apartment there with two girlfriends from high school. Lana and Tammy have a good relationship. They had the normal conflicts that you would expect from two sisters of a similar age but have become increasingly close lately. All the same, it secretly torments Lana that her baby sister has always seemed to have her act together, when she did not. Tammy was the scholar, the athlete, the beauty, and the good girl. Lana was none of those things. Even if Tammy isn't in the house, Lana can see her shadow.

Lana has been a member of St. Andrew Lutheran Church since her baptism. She grew up going to Sunday school and worship every Sunday. These days she attends worship only occasionally. If you asked her, Lana would not know how to describe her relationship with God; she doesn't talk about it or think about it that much. She doesn't think of herself as

deeply spiritual, but she does believe.

Two months ago Lana ran into some trouble. It wasn't like her, but it happened. She went out for a couple of drinks with some old friends from high school but didn't stop drinking soon enough. Walking home from the bar and feeling the giddiness of the alcohol, Lana and her friends started tearing down posters along their path – posters for a music performance by someone they disliked. At one intersection, they wrote their names with a Sharpie on the back of a metal traffic sign. “Lana was here” she wrote. No one might have noticed but for the fact that they were making such a racket of talk and shouting at two in the morning.

It was stupid. It was like nothing Lana or the others had ever done before and it was nothing she would do again, but all it took was one call to 911 and Lana's life had been in a pit ever since. Her normally taciturn father had been very clear about his disappointment with her. He only said it once, shortly after the fact, and then resumed his normal, silent routine (still including the “I love you” at night).

Lana's mother is another story. She had been embarrassed by the incident, which became public in their small town, and she keeps bringing it up. Worse still, Bonnie's “helpful suggestions” have doubled at least, including steady pressure to find new friends with which to associate. Lana believes that her friends are just like her, good people who made one dumb mistake, but her mother disagrees. Lana would love to move out of the house and into an apartment but a good deal of her modest income is being directed to pay a fine and for damages from that night.

An additional consequence for “the incident”, as Lana calls it, was an agreement to do twenty hours of community service. She was able to arrange for ten hours of work with the parks department, cleaning litter at playgrounds on a few weekends but her mother had arranged for the other ten hours through the church.

Bonnie had asked Pastor Ted if there was anything that Lana could do that might help her meet her requirement. She had thought maybe some office or janitorial work would be available, but Pastor Ted offered only one option – to make some visits. There was an older man, widowed a few years before and recently moved into a nursing home, who really needed some company. It would be great if Lana could go and spend some time with Ray. Without consulting Lana, Bonnie agreed.

Ten visits, one hour each. Lana didn't want to do it, really didn't; she would rather have been picking up garbage. But reluctantly, even at first angrily, she went. She's been there four times already, only six to go, and she's counting them down. To her surprise the visits haven't been as bad as she expected. It was awkward at first; most of that first visit they had just stared at each other and played some checkers. But now they were doing something that looked like talking and Ray had proven to be an okay guy, even kind of funny. Still the visits are a reminder to Lana of that stupid mistake she had made and she will be glad when they are over.

Lana remembered Mr. Mertz from church. (She still feels a little awkward calling him Ray, but he insists that's how she should address him.) Mr. Mertz had been a fixture at St. Andrew where he had been an usher for more years than most people could remember. She had never before said anything more than “good morning” to him until these last weeks and it's been interesting getting to know him.

If Ray knows the reason that Lana was coming to visit him, he hasn't said anything. She's grateful for that.

Skeleton Sketch

- 22yrs. Old
- Lives at home.
- Shared apartment with boyfriend on and off in the last year but home now.
- Some community college in business
- Uncertain of what path she wants to take.
- Office job at manufacturing business.
- No real hobbies.
- Spends free time socializing or on her cellphone.
- Has felt somewhat adrift.
- Not regular in church – St. Andrew Lutheran, but not delinquent either.
- Has a younger sister at college out of town.
- Close to sister but jealous that sister has her life together.
- Dad is home – loving but quiet and somewhat distant.
- Mom, Bonnie, loves her but is intrusive, maybe overbearing.
- Mom gives “helpful suggestions” including to get new friends.
- “The Incident” two months ago
- Drinking and vandalism with friends.
- Not common occurrence / one time
- Community service through the church
- Not a common occurrence but a stupid mistake –
- Pastor asked her to visit a shut in who needs company
- Met together 4 times – 6 more required.
- Visits awkward at first awkward – but getting better – even good.
- Though she likes Stan, Lana still resents the community service and is counting down the days to her freedom.
- Her resentment is because this service is a reminder of her failure.

2. *Ray's Story*

Raymond Stanley Cyril Mertz II is 77 years old, a retired contractor who closed his business ten years ago at his retirement. For a while he missed the money, but he's never really missed the work. He dove full time into his love of history, especially American history, and is almost always reading the latest release.

Fifty-one years ago Ray married Helen Bentner, who was five years younger than he was. Three years ago Helen died suddenly of a stroke while out doing some Christmas shopping with a friend. Ray had just assumed that she would always be there for him and then she wasn't. He crawled into a deep dark pit for almost a year. He not only grieved her loss but he grieved the lost opportunity to tell her what she had meant to him. Their marriage had been a happy one but Ray was regretted that he had not vocalized his love and appreciation for her as he should have. It still bothered him.

Ray took confirmation classes from Reverend Walters and joined St. Andrew Lutheran Church just a few months before his marriage to Helen. If he didn't join she wasn't going to marry him. Ray attended faithfully with her, and eventually was tapped to be an usher, a job he took to like a duck to water. After three and half decades of passing out bulletins and

taking up the plates, Ray's face was in many ways the face of St. Andrew. If he had joined the church for Helen's sake, he stayed for his own sake. He loved it.

Helen and Ray raised three children. Their oldest, Stanley III, lives out of state. Stan calls his father occasionally and they both struggle to work through even a short conversation. Ray has only met Stan's new wife one time. Ray's daughter Susan, Suzie he calls her, lives 90 minutes south. She and her husband have two boys John and Mark. Suzie sends cards and sometimes visit. Twice a year she brings the boys by to visit with grandpa for a bit before they head to the outlet mall. Daughter Maggie, Helen and Ray's youngest, was killed in an auto accident when she was 17. Helen never fully recovered from that loss; with time Ray had soldiered on. He sometimes thinks back to his regrets that he had not spent more time with Maggie or showed more affection to her and it strikes him that the same thoughts now plagued him about Helen. Would he ever learn?

Since Helen's death Ray has found it difficult to keep in communication with kids. It isn't that Ray doesn't love them and they him; he just doesn't know how. Helen was always an intermediary for him. When something happened in the kids' lives, they talked with her. When they called on the phone, Helen answered. She always gave Ray a report of what was going on, often with more details than Ray cared to hear.

For the last few years Ray has had increasing health problems. His COPD from years of smoking was making it hard for him to climb the stairs to his bedroom. On top of that he was having too much trouble walking. His hip replacement hadn't go as well as he had hoped; he still gets around with a walker but is beginning to rely on a wheelchair more than he would like. Just about a year ago Ray made the decision to sell the house that he had built for the family and to move into the New Horizons Living Center for Seniors. At New Horizons Ray has a single room with ample space for his Lazy-boy, a table and chairs, and a few other personal possessions like his American history books. Ray hasn't really missed the house but he does miss the privacy of his own home. As a plus, the meals at New Horizons have been pretty good. Helen had prepared all of their meals and after two years of living off his own cooking, Ray was loving the change.

One of the things Ray does miss is Sundays at St. Andrew. He gets the bulletins and newsletters by mail and Pastor Ted brings him Communion once a month, but it's just not the same. Ted misses the music and the people. If it's strange that he misses both his privacy and also people, Ray doesn't think so. The truth is, he's lonely and he told Pastor Ted just that the last time he was there. Talking about his feelings like that wasn't Ray's usual style; he must be getting old.

Skeleton Sketch

- Stanley Raymond Mertz II (Ray)
- Age 77
- Living in assisted living facility for one year
- Some COPD from smoking / bad hip – relies increasingly on wheelchair.
- Retired Contractor / business owner
- Built his own house. Stayed in it as long as he could.
- Accepts his situation at New Horizons Living Center. Thinks the food is pretty good and the care too.
- Helen had done all the cooking. He never learned how. This seems great to him.
- Avid reader of American history, watches History Channel.

- Widower – lost wife Helen three years ago.
- Feels like he never treasured his wife as he should have – didn't know how much he needed her till gone.
- Lost daughter Maggie in auto accident. She was 17. Their youngest.
- Largely disconnected from his two living children – Stanley III and Susan
- Stan lives out of state and calls occasionally.
- Suzie is 90 minutes away and sends cards or visits occasionally.
- Suzie has two boys, John and Mark. Stan's only grandkids. He sees them twice a year.
- Stan was never a father who doted over his children
- Loved them but was not vocal about his feelings or one to strike up conversations with them.
- (In some ways he acted toward his children as Lana's father does toward her.)
- Joined St. Andrew shortly before marriage for Hazel.
- Faithful attendee – usher for many years but never an officer
- Continued to go to church after Hazel passed.
- Stan misses church and the people there.
- Monthly pastor's visit often his only outside company.

APPENDIX F
SERMON TEXTS

SERMON ONE

Date: November 15, 2015

Title: Come O Wisdom, our Teacher

Text: Isaiah 11:2 *The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding.*

Grace, mercy, and peace to each of you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Come, O Wisdom, our Teacher.

What is wisdom? I think it's safe to say that wisdom is not exactly knowledge. You can have all the smarts in the world and still have nothing approaching wisdom. In fact some of those with the most wisdom are those with little formal education. Wisdom is something deeper than knowledge. Wisdom lives in the realm of understanding and insight. It comes from long experience. It speaks to discernment and good judgement. And while there are many who may be said to possess some measure of wisdom there is only One who is the very embodiment of wisdom.

Jesus Christ is Wisdom. For Him wisdom is not an attribute; it's His very essence. Our Lord Jesus is the God who not only knows all things but who comprehends all things and who works all things together for His good purposes. As it is written, "His understanding is beyond measure." (Psalm 147:5)

That means to know Jesus Christ is to know Wisdom itself. To call upon Jesus is to implore for ourselves that wisdom which cannot come from us, or our own experiences, but which must come to us as gift from God. And so we pray: "Come, O Wisdom, our Teacher."

[Pause] I want to invite you to listen in to an imaginary visit – a visit that took place this past Friday afternoon at the New Horizons Living Center. Ray and Lana are meeting together once again. And as they visit talk of wisdom is in the air.

"Five more times," Lana said to herself. She was counting down how many times she still had to come here. Truth be told, her visits with Ray hadn't been that bad. They were a little awkward at first, after all how much does a woman in her early twenties have in common with a man who is pushing eighty? But before long they had found things to talk about and even despite herself Lana was starting to like Ray and to enjoy these little

visits she was compelled to make.

“Hi Ray,” she called as she came into his room. All her life she had known him as Mr. Mertz, the very proper usher at church. She still felt funny calling him Ray but he had insisted. “Lana!” he said, “It’s good to see you. Pull up a chair.” Ray was sitting in his wheelchair by the window. He had watched her coming in from the parking lot. Lana’s visits were the best thing about his Friday afternoons. Scratch that – they were the best thing about his week.

Before long Ray and Lana fell into some pleasant conversation and were working away at what had become their habitual game of checkers. Ray had asked a couple of times if they might play chess, but Lana wasn’t biting.

Ray asked about some of the folks at church – Martha and Sharon – but Lana didn’t really know them, besides, she admitted, she really hadn’t been at St. Andrew for a little while. She was afraid Ray might say something about that, but she was saved by a knock at Ray’s door.

An aide stuck her head in the room. “Mr. Mertz you make sure to drink all that water with your pill. You understand?” “Yes, ma’am!” he replied. And with the flash of a smile the head disappeared.

Lana chuckled under her breath.

“What so funny?” he asked.

“You. Taking orders like that.”

“Well, you get used to it in here; it’s kinda like the army.”

“No offense Ray, but I would have thought by your age, you wouldn’t have to listen to anybody.”

“Well you’d be wrong...but you’d be in good company.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I mean, my dear Lana, that at this point in my life I didn’t think I’d have to listen to anybody either. Shows you what I know. But the truth is I’ve been stupid most of my life because I never did listen to anyone. I always thought I knew better than anybody else. I thought that way even when I was your age.”

“A know-it-all, huh?”

“That’s me. Guilty as charged. Here he is Raymond Cyril Mertz the source of all wisdom.”

“Your middle name is Cyril?”

“Ach. Don’t change the subject. The point is: Do I listen to the nurse? Yes, I listen to the nurse because I need to; she knows better than I do about how to keep this old carcass alive. ...And listening is kind of new for me. It took me most of my life to learn to listen. So now I listen to my doctor; I listen to my pastor; I listen to my nurse – they’re just looking out for me. It’d be dumb not to listen to them. And maybe you could learn something from that.”

She answered in mock offense, “And just what do you mean by that?”

“Nothing. I’m just saying that it took me a long time to understand that I really didn’t understand much. And it took me an even longer time to suck it up and actually listen to somebody else who knew more than I did.”

“I guess I can understand that,” Lana answered.

“I bet you can. Let me ask you Lana: Let’s say you’ve got an important decision to make – or a difficult one – maybe about a job, or getting married, or something like that. Whose opinion would you want to know before you decided? Anybody’s?”

“Um. My friends, maybe.”

“Okay. So your friends are wise people – people who’ve got it all figured out?”

Chuckling again: “Not exactly.”

“What about asking your folks?”

“Well, I don’t know if my dad would even care. I mean I guess he would. But my mom – I don’t have to ask her anything – she tells me exactly what she thinks even if I don’t ask and even if I don’t want to hear it. She does it all the time. Every single day, ever since I moved back home, ever since... well, she just tells me what she thinks. She has what she calls ‘helpful advice’ and it’s all about how I should live my life, and what kind of friends I should have, and how I need to get my life together. It’s like I don’t know anything. It’s just too much.”

“I’m sorry if I touched a nerve, Lana. But if you don’t mind me asking: Is your mom ever right?”

... “Yeah. Sometimes. But I’d never tell her that. She’d never let me hear the end of it.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying, Lana. It’s hard for any of us to admit that we don’t have it all together, that we don’t have all the wisdom in the world in us.”

Ray turned his wheelchair around, inadvertently knocking a few checkers off the edge of the small table. He grabbed a small white book from his nightstand, paged through it for a moment and then turning again, handed the book to Lana.

“What’s this?”

“It’s my Bible.”

“Ray, I’ve got a Bible. That’s very sweet but you don’t have to give me a Bible.”

“I’m not giving it to you. I just want you to look at it.”

[puzzled] “Okay.?”

“Now I got that Bible when I was confirmed. That was fifty some years ago, right before I married Helen. She said she wouldn’t marry me if I didn’t join St. Andrew and become Lutheran. ... What do you think of that Bible?”

“It’s nice I guess? ... What do you want me to say?”

“What kind of shape would you say that Bible’s in?”

“Pretty good.”

“That’s the problem! That’s my problem. I’ve had that Bible for over fifty years and it’s still in pretty good condition. It shouldn’t be. But do you know when I actually started reading that Bible? Last year! ... All those years I was an usher ... all those years I was

going to church ...all those years I was trying to teach my kids right from wrong, I never even opened it – not until Helen was dead – not until I was in this stupid nursing home and had nothing else to do that I finally wised up a little.Here, let me take that back.”

Ray placed the Bible back on his nightstand and the two of them sat there in silence for a few minutes, each of them advancing their checker in turn.

Lana finally asked. “Are you alright Ray?”

He said under his breath, as if to himself. “The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding.” (Isaiah 11:2)

“What did you say Ray?”

“It’s something I read a few days ago. I’ve been thinking about it. [louder] The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding. It’s about Jesus – how He’s the only one with all the answers. ...I wish I’d figured that out a long time ago – trusted in myself less and trusted in God more. It’s not just that I don’t have all the answers – I don’t have any of the answers – but He does...”

“...Listen Lana, I don’t know what to tell you about your mother, or about her “helpful advice”, but I do know that I spent a lot of years thinking I was wise when I was really a fool. Real wisdom comes from God and His Word. Like it says, ‘the Spirit of wisdom rests on Him’ – not on you, not on me – Him!”

Lana gave the slightest nod of understanding... and then Ray watched as an impish smile stole over Lana’s face. “What about the cross Ray? If Jesus is so wise why did He die? Wouldn’t somebody who was wise find a way to avoid dying like that?”

Ray smiled and pointed his finger at her. “You’re a real smart aleck you know that? ...But I guess I would say that sometimes the wisest thing of all doesn’t look very wise to the world. There’s man’s wisdom and then there’s God’s wisdom and in the end only one of them actually counts for anything. What Jesus did was God’s wisdom. The cross was what we needed even when we didn’t know we needed it.”

“That’s a pretty good answer Ray.”

“I thought so,” he replied.

Lana looked down at the board and moved a red checker one place up and to the right. Ray eyed the board for a moment and then nearly jumped out his wheelchair in excitement. In the blink of an eye his black checker jumped three times, clearing all but one of Lana’s pieces from the board.

“Checkmate!” he hollered.

“We’re playing checkers, Ray.”

“I know,” he said.

For now we leave our friends at the New Horizons Living Center but the thoughts they pondered continue with us. What is wisdom?

Our human nature is inflamed with the sin of pride. We too easily trust in ourselves and rely upon our own judgements. We too quickly shut our ears to the wisdom of others and shut our lives to the greater wisdom of God. We keep God's Word at bay – not reading it, or hearing it as we ought – trusting that we have all the answers, or perhaps being afraid that God will lead us in a different direction than our own wisdom would choose.

And in this arrogance of ours there is ignorance. Worse still, there is death. For the way of human wisdom is the way that leads to destruction. It divides us from others. It divides us from God and His purposes. It leads to regret and finally to hell.

But God is patient with us. He is gracious and merciful. And despite the foolishness of our pride and the depth of our sin God freely gives us His own Wisdom – the Wisdom made flesh for you.

God gives you Jesus, who walked among us in perfect obedience to God's Word. God gives you Jesus who suffered and died for your salvation.

In the weakness of the manger, in the foolishness of the cross, Jesus comes to you as the very power and wisdom of God. He liberates you from self-sought ways. He frees you from your past. He opens your life to Him. He opens your ears to His Word.

It says in Proverbs: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding." (Proverbs 3:5) When we pray, "Come O Wisdom" we implore our Lord Jesus – who is the Wisdom of God – to come and cast down pride and arrogance from the throne of our hearts – to overturn everything in us that is falsely called knowledge, that He alone might be enthroned in heart, and mind, and life, as our only true Teacher, and the one upon whom we rely for all.

Come O Wisdom, our Teacher, lead us in the way of understanding. Amen.

The peace of God which passes understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.

SERMON TWO

Date: November 22, 2015

Title: Come O Adonai, our Lord

Text: Isaiah 11:4-5 *With righteousness He shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and He shall strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of His waist, and faithfulness the belt of His loins.*

Grace, mercy, and peace to each of you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Special greetings in Christ to little Nora who on this day has become a child of God. Amen.

Come, O Adonai, our Lord.

Adonai! Now there's a word you don't hear every day. Adonai is a Hebrew word and it means, as our sermon title suggests...Lord. And if Adonai is not an everyday word for us, it certainly was an everyday word for God's people of old. For the believers of the Old Testament times, and even for those living in the days of Jesus, Adonai was the primary title by which they called upon God in worship and in prayer.

Adonai or Lord is a title of great reverence to the Almighty, a word that acknowledges Him as having dominion over all things, for it is He who gives us life, and breath, and all things – and to Him we owe our allegiance, our obedience, and our worship.

Two thousand years ago when Jesus came into this world that was the title that He bore. They called Him Adonai...Lord. In fact that's the powerful confession of the New Testament about Him – that, Jesus is Lord! That He, Jesus, is the God of the Old Testament incarnate, the Creator of the World, the Savior of Israel, the Promised Messiah, the Coming Judge.

I ask you to keep that little word “Lord” in your mind as I ask you to join me on another visit to the New Horizons Living Center. The time is this past Friday afternoon, and our friends Ray and Lana are about to meet together once again.

Ray was watching the parking lot from his window when he saw Lana's car pull into an open space in the second row. He smiled to see her. Who would have thought it? A few months ago when Pastor Maxwell asked Ray if he would be open to some visits from the Perez girl, Ray had just assumed he meant Tammy. Tammy Perez was the conscientious-overachiever type, just the kind who might volunteer to visit an old man in the nursing home. And color Ray surprised when it was not Tammy but her older sister Lana who appeared at his door.

He had never figured Lana to be a people person, she had always seemed so quiet, and...well, different. But Ray's surprise at having Lana as his visitor had soon given way to joy. Lana was a delightful young woman, sassy but sweet, and Ray counted down the hours before each of her visits.

“Four...more...times.” Those were the words that Lana said to herself as she made three soft knocks on Ray’s door. “Four...more...times,” – and she wouldn’t have to come back here again, and her life could get back to normal, whatever normal might be. She felt guilty that she had not told Ray that her visits with him would soon be ending. She really liked him. But this had nothing to do with Ray; this was about her life.

“Come in!” Ray called. As usual, he was seated in his wheelchair and the checkerboard on the table in front of him was all set to go. He had even procured a Diet Coke for his guest. He beamed. “Lana! It’s good to see you. Pull up a chair.”

Ray and Lana slipped comfortably into their time together and soon were deep into their second game of checkers. They had talked about the weather, the town, the nursing home...they had even solved a few of the world’s greatest problems. When Ray asked, “How are your mom and dad, Lana?”

He could see her bristle and knew immediately it was the wrong thing to ask.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said.

“No, it’s okay,” she said, “it’s just been a tough week at home, that’s all.”

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Me, apparently,” she replied. “It just seems like nothing I do is right anymore. Mom’s been on my case really hard this week for some reason, and she’s been relentless with her “helpful suggestions” about my future. She even started to leave college brochures on my nightstand – I’m not ready to go back to college. I might never be. I’ve got a job – a good one – but it’s a failure to her without that piece of paper. I mean don’t I get to choose what I want to do with my own life? It’s my life!”

“I’m sorry Lana,” Ray reflected. “It’s got to be hard moving back home.”

“It’s not easy, that’s for sure. I’d love to get a place of my own but I can’t do it right now. You know, I even thought about moving in with Rick – that would really send mom into fits.” It occurred to Lana that Ray might agree with her mother on the idea of moving in with Rick so she made haste to change the subject.

“What about you Ray? How’s your family?”

“Good. ...I guess. Stan called a couple weeks ago, he’s pretty deep into some project, something with enzymes. And I just got a card from Suzie on Monday. She says she and the boys are going to stop by at Christmastime on the way to their dad’s.”

“It sounds like you don’t see your kids very much.” Lana said.

“Well they’re kind of far away. And they’ve got lives of their own. And I don’t know, maybe if you asked them they’d say I wasn’t a very good father anyhow.”

“Now why would they say that?” She asked.

“I don’t really think they’d say that. ...but I sometimes wonder if they might think it. You see the way I grew up the dad was the bread winner and the mom took care of the kids, and that’s pretty much how Helen and I did things. She was there for the kids when they

fussed or got hurt. She covered the teacher conferences, the games, what have you. And even after the kids grew up and moved out, when they called home they talked to their mother. Of course Helen always told me all about it, but now that's she's gone I guess me and the kids never really learned how to talk to one another."

"Well, congratulations Ray!" Lana was reaching an open hand across the checkerboard. Ray looked at her with a puzzled expression.

"Congratulations," she repeated, "you're a screw up – just like me. Welcome to the club."

Ray did not much like being called a 'screw-up' but he realized Lana was trying to inject a little lightheartedness into their conversation, so he shook her outstretched hand and gave her a little smile.

"You know I'm kind of surprised at you Ray," she said. "All those years I saw you in church with that nice suit on. I would have thought you were as close to being perfect as they come. Turns out you're not really perfect at all. ...It kind of makes me wonder about all those other people down at St. Andrew. I bet they're all screw-ups too."

"Lana – could you use a different word please? Why don't we say that we've all got things in our life that we're not proud of. That we're all sinners. I think that's the word you really want. And yes, that would be true of everybody at St. Andrew – we're all sinners, without exception."

"You know Ray," she said, "that might actually help me. ...Going to church has been pretty difficult lately – it's not just that my mom and dad are there, it's everybody. I always feel like people at church are judging me – you know looking down on me, like they're better than I am. I don't know if they're really doing that, but I feel that way. But you said it, Ray. All those people are just like you and me, they're not perfect, we're all screw ups...sorry Ray...I mean we're all sinners."

Ray looked down at the checkerboard as if to examine his next move, but Lana could tell he wasn't looking at the board; he was thinking. She sipped quietly at her Diet Coke, wondering if she had disappointed Ray by letting too much of the real Lana show.

When Ray looked up again there was a gleam of inspiration in his eyes. "Lana, I want to show you that I'm not such an old grump about your language as you might suppose I am, I'm going to say a 'four-letter word' of my own."

"Do you mean a bad word?" she asked.

"Yes - a 'four-letter word."

"Okay," she said, "let's hear it."

"Alright, my 'four-letter word' is...Lord."

Lana looked disappointed. "Okay Ray that is a word with four letters but I don't think it fits the classic definition of "four-letter word."

"Well I say it does." he argued. "I think Lord is a dirty word today – it's the kind of word

that makes people today uncomfortable, like those other words should. I think the word 'Lord' makes people squirm. You see "Lord" means there's somebody over them, somebody they have to answer to. And I don't think people like that idea at all, but like it or not we all have a Lord, and we're all going to answer to Him."

"It seems to me," he continued, "that a lot of what you and I have been talking about today has to do with that little word – "Lord."

"I'm really not following you Ray."

"Well, for example," he answered, "you said something to the effect that you should be able to control your own life – make your own decisions, without your mom or anybody else interfering. I understand that, but if Jesus is Lord – doesn't that mean that He should be the One in control? Doesn't that mean that He gets final say about what's going on in your life? – The same is true for me by the way."

"And then there's that whole question about whether your mom is pleased with you – for that matter are my kids pleased with me? Those might be important questions, but it's more important to know whether Jesus is pleased with you, and pleased with me. He's Lord. He's the only one whose opinion really matters."

"And even all that talk about those people at church who may or may not be judging you. What do you care about that? Judging you is the Lord's business – nobody else is qualified."

"So there you have it – my four-letter word for the day, 'Lord, Lord, Lord.'"

"Watch your language Ray," Lana chided. "And by the way," she said, "remember what I told you about you making me feel better about going church? I take it back, and I'm not kidding. It's bad enough to worry about what those other people are thinking about me, now I'm all worried about what the Lord thinks about me. Thanks a lot Ray!"

"Lana, remember?... We're all sinners. ...I understand that it can be a daunting thing to have a Lord – especially one who knows everything about you, and I'm sure I've got more reason than you to be afraid of what the Lord must think of me – but you don't have to worry."

"Whenever I get the least bit uncertain of where I stand with the Lord, I just look at that and I remember." Ray pointed to the wall behind him and to the small wooden cross that was placed over his headboard.

"Lana, look at that cross. You've got a Lord who loves you so much that He died on that cross for you. Whatever judgment you or I deserved from Him, He took it for us. You are forgiven 100% and the Lord delights in you."

"Maybe your life is a little off-track right now, I don't know. If there are some things in your life that are wrong before the Lord, do something about it. But don't fret over what

other's think, and don't you ever forget that your Lord loves you, He forgives you, and He is always with you.

Lana placed her Diet Coke on the table in front of her. "Thank you Ray," she said.

Ray smiled and reached across the checkerboard with an open hand. "Congratulations Lana! "You're redeemed... just like me. Welcome to the club."

For the present time we take our leave of Ray and Lana.

What does it mean to have a Lord and to live under a Lord? The answer to that question touches every aspect of our life and thought and as followers of Jesus Christ it's something that we spend a lifetime discovering.

Everyday our inborn sinful nature rebels against the claims of Christ upon us, not wanting to acknowledge any Lord except self – resenting the very idea that we are accountable to God.

But day by day the new nature which God gave us in Holy Baptism finds its delight in the Lord, for in the person of Jesus Christ we have come to know a Lord like no other.

In Jesus we have a Lord who is mighty, yet He has compassion on the weak. We have a Lord who is exalted, yet He makes His dwelling place among the lowly. We have a Lord who is Righteous, hating sin, yet He eats and drinks with sinners. We have a Lord who judges justly, yet He shows love and forgiveness to all who trust in Him. He is the Lord who rules in mercy from the cross.

Isaiah writes of Him: "He shall not judge by what His eyes see, or decide disputes by what His ears hear, but with righteousness He shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth." (Isaiah 11:3-4)

However broken by sin and failure we may be, however great our rebellion has been, we are able to come before Jesus in the confidence of His grace, and call upon Him in the assurance of His love. "Dear Jesus, let no other be Lord and Master over us. Come and reign over us. Come, O Adonai, our Lord."

The peace of God which passes human understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.

SERMON THREE

Date: November 29, 2015

Title: Come O Root of Jesse, our Hope

Text: Isaiah 11:1 *There shall come forth a Shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a Branch from his roots shall bear fruit.*

Grace, mercy, and peace to each of you from God our Father and from Jesus Christ, our Advent King. Amen.

Come, O Root of Jesse, Our Hope.

Let's start with Jesse. Jesse was a man who lived about 3,000 years ago in a little village of Judea that you may have heard of, called Bethlehem. And Jesse was the father of eight sons. Now one day the Word of the Lord came to the prophet Samuel, God told him to go to the household of Jesse and there the Lord would reveal to him the next king of Israel. So Samuel went.

Samuel asked Jesse if he might meet his sons. So starting from the oldest Jesse paraded seven strong, handsome sons in front of the prophet, each of them as kingly as the next. But to each of them the Lord told Samuel, "no". At last Samuel asked Jesse if he might have any other sons. "There's just that runt out there with the sheep," Jesse said, "I'm sure you're not interested in him." "Get him," said the prophet. And Jesse did. And when Samuel saw that young man, God spoke to him, and the prophet uncorked his horn of oil and anointed that boy on the spot to be the king of all Israel. That young man's name was David – King David, the son of Jesse.

Now in time – as you know – Jesse's son became a great king. And God made a promise to David that one of his sons would be king forever. When David died and his son Solomon became king after him, God's promise seemed to be going strong. But then the wheels started coming off the bus. In the reign of David's grandson Rehoboam the kingdom was divided in two. And in a few short centuries there was neither king nor kingdom left at all – there was just Israel's subjugation to one world power or another.

That once noble family tree of Jesse had been cut down. For all intents and purposes the family tree was nothing but a dead stump. And what became of God's promise? ...God remembered His promise. And God spoke through the prophet Isaiah saying: "There shall come forth a Shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a Branch from his roots shall bear fruit." (Isaiah 11:1)

God was saying, "Don't give up hope!" "When you see that dead old stump of Jesse's kingly tree, there's life in there, and one day you'll see it. And sure enough just like God said, at just the right time He appeared: God sent forth His Son, born of the Virgin Mary, born in direct lineage from Jesse to David to Solomon to and so on. He came, the rightful and true heir, the promised and eternal king. Hope sprung up from that dead stump of Jesse ...and you'll never guess the name of the little village where He was born.

Jesus is the shoot that grew up out of the stump of Jesse. But Jesus is more than just the greatest offspring of Jesse's line. He is the Root of Jesse – He's not just the end of the family tree – He's the beginning and Source of it all as well. The promise Maker – and the fulfillment of the promise.

And so today as we think about Jesus as the Root of Jesse and the Branch of Jesse, I invite you once more to make a trip with me to the New Horizons Living Center and to our friends Ray and Lana.

Lana was this close. Just an inch away from having all the pieces come together for her. She had it all worked out in her mind. She had three more visits with Ray and then she could put that mess behind her. Her debt would be paid off by the end of January and then she could actually afford to rent her own apartment. And just the thought of that new lease on life gave her a reason to get up in the morning... She was this close, until Wednesday when the bottom dropped out of Lana's world.

On Friday afternoon when Lana sat down opposite Ray at the small table in his room, Ray could tell immediately that something was wrong. Lana was distracted and distant. And it seemed to Ray that this was something more than Lana's usual frustrations with her somewhat overbearing mother.

Ray leaned back in his wheelchair, putting a few inches of distance between himself and the checkerboard in front of him. This wasn't a day for games. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Lana closed her eyes, as if to shut out the world, but she did not answer. "Lana," he repeated, "What's wrong?"

She opened her eyes again, having composed herself.

"Ray, you know a lot about God, right?"

"I know some things," he said.

"Ray, do you think God ever punishes people for the things they did?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Like, say you did something wrong does God sometimes make bad things happen to you because of what you did? Like maybe He makes you get sick – or He makes somebody you love get sick, or something like that?"

"Lana!" he answered, "I don't believe that at all and you shouldn't either! When Jesus says He forgives you all of your sins He means it! They are forgiven and if your sins are forgiven then God is not punishing you for anything. Period."

"I guess I know that," she acknowledged, "but sometimes it just seems that's how it works."

"Lana, that's not how it works. So why don't you tell me what's going on."

Lana thought about what to say. Part of her wanted to tell Ray the truth about her visits to him and the fact that they would soon be ending. She wanted to apologize to him for being such a jerk – for taking advantage of his kindness and friendship – but she couldn't bring herself to have that conversation.

But that was only part of what was weighing so heavily on her, and the rest she could talk about. “It’s my job, Ray. I’m going to lose it.”

“Why?” Ray said indignantly. “I hope it’s not because of me. Are you supposed to be at work right now?”

“No Ray the shop closes at noon on Friday. We’re good. But come March Jack is closing the shop for good. He’s decided to retire.”

“Well, he’s going to sell the business, isn’t he?” Ray asked.

“Nope. He doesn’t want to. His house is on that property and he doesn’t want to move. So as soon as he turns 70 he’s going on Social Security and I’m going on unemployment. ...He dropped that little bomb on Wednesday – right before Thanksgiving – [ironically] “Yippee! There’s something to be thankful for! Now what am I going to do?”

“Lana, you’re a smart girl,” Ray assured her. “I’m sure you’re going to have another job in no time at all – and it’ll be a better one.”

“Whose gonna hire me Ray? Nobody wants me. I’m trouble.”

“Lana, don’t talk about yourself that way. You’re a kind, intelligent woman, and this isn’t going to last. You will get another job, and in the meantime I’m sure your folks aren’t going to let you starve.”

“Ray that’s the whole problem!” she blurted in anger and frustration. “I’m 22 years old and I’m sick and tired of being dependent on my parents all the time. I’m sick of the harping all the time too. Tammy’s 19 and she’s doing great – full ride to Amherst, a nice little apartment with her friends. She rolls into town for Thanksgiving as mommy’s perfect little daughter and then she gets to leave again...not me. Ray I just can’t stay in that house any longer. It’s not just that Mom and I are butting heads all the time – it’s just a constant reminder that my life is a dead end. I feel so trapped.”

“Is Tammy still home?” Ray asked. She nodded. “Until Sunday.”

“Is that part of what’s bothering you?” he asked.

“Yes and No,” she said, “and don’t get me wrong. I love Tammy; we’re great. We always have been. I’m very proud of her. I even miss her when she’s gone. But when she’s home it makes the whole mom thing so much worse. I mean, Mom never comes out says ‘why aren’t you more like your little sister?’ but when she’s always bragging up Tammy and nagging up me. What am I supposed to think? ...I don’t know, Ray; it just seems like every time I have something good in sight, it gets yanked away. I might as well just give up.”

“Hope is a difficult thing.” Ray said. “When things are good you don’t need hope, and when they’re bad it’s hard to find a reason to have hope. But Lana, you do have hope. The Lord is with you, and He will bring you through this to better days – more importantly He will be faithful to you no matter what and His promises to you will not fail. I know things look bad right now but God’s good plans and purposes for you remain and you can trust Him.”

“I know that Ray – it’s just that things still stink the way they are.”

“Yes they do,” he acknowledged. “I’ve lost jobs before; it’s not fun, but this storm will

pass. And even while things are hard it doesn't change what I'm saying to you about God being with you, and Him working for your good. ... I don't want to be hard on you because I know you're hurting but I want to give you a little perspective."

Ray put his hands on the wheels of his chair and rolled himself back from the table. "You see these legs of mine? They're worthless. I used to climb ladders all day, walk on rooflines – I could run for miles, now I can hardly walk to that bathroom over there. I came into this place a year ago for therapy, 'let's get your legs stronger' they said. Well they're not stronger and guess what? They're not doing therapy anymore and the truth is I'm never going to walk again."

Ray turned his chair around to face the nightstand behind him. He picked up the framed photograph of Helen that he kept there, and then turned halfway back again. He stared at the picture for a moment, gently tracing the image with his finger. "My Helen is gone," he said, "she's never coming back to me. I'll go to her but she's not coming back."

Ray turned back to face her. "Lana, if you want to talk about reasons to give up hope, I think I have you beat."

Lana felt terrible, "I'm so sorry Ray. I didn't mean to be so selfish. I shouldn't complain to you. I'm so sorry."

"Now you stop that!" he said. "Don't apologize to me, you don't have anything to be sorry for. And you can complain to me anytime you want. I care about you Lana. If something's wrong in your life I want to hear it. But let me finish what I was trying to say."

The point I'm trying to make is: I'm a crippled old man with a dead wife and no prospects of things getting better and yet Lana, I am actually filled with hope. Despite all the setbacks and loss, despite the fact that the Grim Reaper is probably just down that hallway looking for me, I know that God loves me. I know that Jesus is with me just like He promised. I know that nothing will ever separate me from God's love – not hardships, not job loss, not worthless legs, not even death. I know that I have eternal life in Jesus. ...So this may sound a little crazy to you but I'm a more hopeful person now than I ever was, and I think the difference is that I finally started hoping in the right things."

Lana said, "I don't think that's crazy at all. I think it makes sense."

"Let me tell you a story." Ray said. "When I was a young boy my grandfather had this great big tree out back of his farm house. Beautiful. I spent many happy hours climbing in that tree and swinging on the rope that was tied from its branches. And I still remember that Sunday afternoon when we pulled into his driveway and lo and behold the tree was gone – there was just a stump left. I wanted to cry. ...I think I did cry... Come to find out a big windstorm had ripped the tree to shreds that week and grandpa had no choice but to cut it down."

...But sometime later, it might have been the following year, I don't remember, but I do remember looking at the stump of that tree and seeing a branch growing up out of that

stump – had little leaves and everything. I asked my granddad about it and I'll never forget what he said. He said, "Raymond, you remember how big that tree used to be, well there's a whole other part of that tree – just as big – that's hidden below the ground." He said that those roots were alive, and as long as those roots had life the tree could still grow – even from a dead old stump.

I'll tell you Lana, that just about blew my mind to think there was something so big like that hidden down there in the earth. I still think about it. And it reminds me that there's always more to what God is doing than what our human eyes can see.

Today, to look at me you'd say I'm like that old stump – worn out and hopeless, but the truth is I have a hidden life in Jesus. Underneath everything you can see about me, I'm connected to something bigger and better. I'm connected to those roots – to that life that only Jesus can give. And because He lives for me, and with me, and in me, I have hope.

Lana, you're connected to that same living Root. Right below the surface, Jesus is there – He is your life, your salvation, your hope. He is the promise of good things to come."

Ray and Lana had a lot more to talk about on Friday, more than we can now share. They never did get around to that checker game but by the time they said their goodbyes Lana was feeling a lot better. Nothing really had changed about her life, and yet something had changed.

We'll visit with Ray and Lana again on another day.

Dear friends, Jesus Christ is the Branch which grew up from the stump of Jesse – He is the promised eternal King, the Hope of Israel.

Jesus Christ is also the Root of Jesse, the Source of all life and hopefulness. Whoever abides in Christ has a hope in Him which the world cannot take away.

On a dark Friday afternoon that Branch of Jesse was cut down for you and me and they placed him in a tomb. And in three short days that Branch sprouted again in the victory of everlasting life. You have life, hidden in Him – in Christ, who died for your sins and is risen again. His Word and promise to you will remain forever.

I leave you this morning with the words of the Apostle Paul to the Romans and Paul begins by quoting the Old Testament: "Isaiah says, 'The Root of Jesse will come, even He who arises to rule the Gentiles; in Him will the Gentiles hope.' May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope." (Romans 15:12-13)

Come, O Root of Jesse, our Hope. Amen.

SERMON FOUR

Date: December 6, 2015

Title: Come O Key of David, our Redeemer

Text: Isaiah 22:22 *And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.*

Beloved in the Lord, grace, mercy, and peace be with each of you from God our Father and from Jesus Christ our Advent King. Amen.

Come, O Key of David, Our Redeemer

In Isaiah 22, God speaks about the Coming Messiah; He says, “I will place on His shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and He shall shut, and none shall open.”

Have you ever thought what a powerful thing a little key can be? A very small key can open a very large door. Keys have the ability to lock and unlock, to open and close. But keys aren't just about the power or ability to open and close, they indicate a right to do those things. A burglar can break down a door and enter, but the one who has the right to enter has the key.

So when Isaiah says that Jesus will have the “key of the house of David” it is a way of saying that He has limitless royal authority – unlimited right of access – that He has the right to lock up and the right to set free. He has the power to punish and the power to pardon. He opens – no one can close. He closes – no one can open.

In the Book of Revelation Jesus appears to St. John and says, “I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.” (Revelation 1:18)

Jesus Christ holds all power and authority, and by His death and resurrection He is at work in His Church today to set people free by the forgiveness of their sin. Jesus unshackles us from bondage and slavery to sin. He liberates us from the shame of our iniquities and from all fear of punishment. By grace alone, apart from any merit or worthiness in us, Jesus unbars the gate of heaven before us, and swings wide the door. Jesus is the Key that sets us free.

As we think about these things, we check in with the continuing story of our friends Ray and Lana over at the New Horizons Living Center.

Two more visits with Ray and it would have been over and she would never have to go back to that stupid nursing home again. That thought which had been such a comfort to Lana for so many weeks was now beginning to haunt her.

Since her very first visit with Ray she had been faithfully counting down the remainder of her obligation. 10 visits, 9 visits, 8, 7... she couldn't wait for that number to be zero, and she would never look back. But Ray had ruined everything – he had made himself her

friend.

Lana had been so determined not to get close, and it should have been easy for her, she'd spent most of her life not letting anyone get close. But somehow Ray had wormed his way in. It turned out that he wasn't the stogy old man Lana remembered from church all those years ago. Ray was funny, and kind, and most perplexing of all he really seemed to care about Lana – it was an all too unfamiliar experience for her.

So now with just two more visits to go, what should have been a growing sense of relief was becoming for Lana a mounting pile of guilt – as if she didn't have enough already to feel guilty about. She needed to tell Ray the truth.

There was a knock on Ray's door. "Come on in," he hollered. And when his door opened to reveal Lana standing in his doorway, Ray stared at her with mild confusion.

"Am I getting Alzheimer's?" he asked. "It's not Friday already is it?"

"No Ray," she said with a smile, "it's only Tuesday. I just wanted to stop by and talk for a bit, if that's okay."

"It's more than okay," he replied, "as long as you don't mind that I'm still in my bathrobe and slippers. ...Don't you have work?"

"I took the day off," she said, "it's not like Jack's going to fire me with the business closing so soon. And besides I've got some time coming."

"Well, in that case," Ray said, "pull up a chair. I'll get out the checkerboard."

"No checkers Ray. I've got something I need to tell you. And I just want you to listen okay?"

"Sure," Ray said, "I'm all ears."

Lana pulled a chair close to Ray and sat down to face him. She closed her eyes, breathed in deeply and then exhaled, and opened her eyes again.

"Ray, when Pastor Maxwell told you I was coming to visit you, did he tell you why?"

"No," he replied, "he just asked if I was open to having a visitor – and I was all for it. Was he supposed to tell me something?"

"He wasn't," she said, "but I thought he might have."

Ray...I'm here because I did something wrong. My visits to you have been part of something they call community service. It's a punishment – that doesn't sound right – it's not a punishment for me to be here – I like coming to see you, I'm just saying it's a requirement for me to be here. When I started to visit you I was only here because I had to, but that's not the way it is anymore. I wanted to tell you that, and to say that I'm sorry for not telling you before, and I'm sorry for taking advantage of your kindness."

"Well," said Ray, "that does explain that second visit."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

He said, "I couldn't figure out why you came back that second time when all we did was sit here and stare at each for the first visit. That was kind of rough."

"Yes it was," she laughed.

"But Lana," Ray continued, "I don't care why you kept coming; I'm just glad that you

did. And I don't think you owe me any apology at all. I don't require my visitors to explain why they come."

"But don't you want to know what happened?" she asked.

"I don't need to." Ray said.

"But I want you to know," she insisted.

"Alright, then just give me the highlights," Ray said, "I don't want you talking bad about my friend Lana."

"Okay," Lana said, "here's the short version: This past summer I went out with a couple friends and we ended up having a little too much to drink – probably a lot too much. Now we didn't drive a car or anything– we're not that dumb – but we did vandalize a car that belonged to an ex-boyfriend of mine. We keyed up the sides and broke a couple lights. And because we were making so much noise at 2 in the morning, I guess somebody called the police. ...Skipping the details, the end of the story is that we took the consequences: fines, restitution, and community service. So here I am."

Ray wasn't sure how to respond, so he said the first thing that came into his mind. He asked, "How did you think to visit with me? You obviously knew me from St. Andrew, but not well."

"Oh, this whole thing was mother's doing," Lana said. "You know, she can't help but meddle in my life any time she can. As soon as she found out I needed ten more hours of community service, she raced right down to church to tell pastor what a terrible person I was and ask if he could come up with anything that would qualify. The two of them, they set this whole thing up!"

"I'm glad they did," Ray said. "Do you think Pastor Maxwell was aware that you had not been consulted?"

"Probably not," she said. "It's mom. It's just the way she is. And I'm sure she got on the phone right away to cry to all her friends about what an embarrassment I am."

"Now Lana, do you know if that's true?"

"I'm sure it's true!" she said. "Everybody knows – except you, till now. So you might as well know too what kind of person I really am."

"I already know what kind of person you are," Ray said, "and I happen to like you."

"Stop trying to be nice Ray. You haven't been listening. What I did was wrong and then I lied to you about it and that was wrong. I'm not a good person Ray, so don't tell me that I am."

"You're right Lana," he said, "You're not a good person."

Lana was taken aback. Even though she had told Ray not to think of her as a good person, part of her hoped that he would, that he would affirm her in some way.

"You are not a good person Lana," Ray repeated, "and I'm not a good person. Do you remember what we talked about just about a couple of weeks ago? That we're all sinners – all of us. That means none of us are good people – not before God anyway. But God is

good, and gives His love and forgiveness to people like you and me.

“Lana believe it or not, I’ve done worse things than what you did – I’m not telling you what they were – but I did them, and I’m not proud of it at all. But no matter how big or terrible those things are – God’s grace is bigger. No matter how unworthy I am – Jesus is most worthy – He died for us.”

Lana said, “Ray you don’t understand, it’s not just about last summer – it’s about a lot of other things too. You don’t really know who I am – what I’ve done.”

“What’s there to know?” Ray demanded. “Is there some deep dark secret that you’re going to tell me that will make me say ‘well in that case God doesn’t love you’ or in that case He won’t forgive you?” There isn’t such a thing! ...Lana, long before you were born God already knew the worst thing there was to know about you, and He still loved you, and He still sent His Son to be your Savior.”

“It seems to me Lana that you’ve got some thought in the corner of your mind that somehow God’s grace is not sufficient for you. That somehow Jesus’ death made good for everybody else but not you. That’s the devil talking! The blood of Jesus covers you – all of you!

The Bible says that, ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them.’ (2 Corinthians 5:19) ‘Not counting.’ Did you hear that Lana? God is not counting yours sins against you because He is counting what Jesus did for you, when He gave His life for you.”

...Lana when’s the last time that you went to church?”

“I don’t remember,” she said.

“Then will you do me a favor,” he asked, “and go this Sunday – and then do yourself a favor and listen to the words that pastor says when he announces the forgiveness of sin. You tell yourself that those words are for you – when it says you are forgiven – that’s you! That’s God’s Word and promise – it’s Jesus setting you free.”

...On Friday afternoon Lana came back to visit with Ray at their regular time. Ray pulled out the checkerboard and they sat there talking about this and that and had a pretty great time. If Lana had thought about it, her visit on Friday was visit number 10; it was the last that she was required to make, but as it turned out Lana wasn’t counting.

Lana still has some real problems, especially in her relationship with her mother – but it seems like her relationship with God might be moving in a good direction. We’ll keep an eye on her, and Ray.

It seems possible that many of us who are gathered here today might at times have struggles with sins of our past that haunt our conscience. There are things we have done, of which we are ashamed. They may even cause us to wonder if God could still love us, still forgive us, still accept us. To such – to you - I say, hear the Word of the Lord:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Romans 8:1

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 2 Corinthians 5:17

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8

It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Romans 8:33

By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. Ephesians 2:8

We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. 1John 2:1-2

If the Son sets you free you shall be free indeed. John 8:36

Jesus is the Key who sets us free. ...All your sins are forgiven you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Come O Key of David, our Redeemer. AMEN.

SERMON FIVE

Date: December 13, 2015

Title: Come O Dayspring, our Joy

Text: Isaiah 9:2 *The people who walked in darkness, have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.*

Grace, mercy, and peace be multiplied to each of you from God our Father and from Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Come O Dayspring, our Joy

Imagine a night of deepest darkness – a night so dark that it’s impossible to see your way forward and you are tempted to give up in despair, when suddenly on the horizon you see it – that pinpoint of light that announces the dawn of a new day. And as the light appears, that darkness, once so foreboding, is banished as if it had never been. It is the dayspring, the rising of the light, the dawn of the new day which dispels the darkness.

Today we call upon our Lord Jesus Christ as our true Dayspring – the Lord who has come to bring light and joy into a world of darkness, sorrow, and death.

The prophet Isaiah wrote, “The people who walked in darkness, have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.” We are those people, who lived in the darkness of unbelief and in the shadow and fear of death. And Christ is that Light – who has appeared for us to cast out the dark works of sin, and illumine heart, and mind, and life with the hope and joy that only He can give.

Our Lord says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12) Today we give thanks that our Dayspring from on high has appeared, dispelling all shadows and filling us with joy¹ everlasting.

...Let’s take a trip to the nursing home and check in with our friends Ray and Lana as they meet together once again at the New Horizons Living Center.

Ray was sitting in darkness. Quite literally actually, the overhead light in his room had not been turned on that day, and the dim wintertime sun was doing little to provide any illumination. And that gloom which filled Ray’s surroundings was a perfect reflection of the gloom that filled his heart. It was D-day, as he called it, Death-Day. It was also a Friday and Lana would be arriving to visit him in just a few minutes.

There was a time when Ray had planned on asking her to skip this particular day, but after Lana had opened up to him the way she did last week, he hadn’t felt right asking her not to come. She might have seen it as a rejection of some kind. So he decided to make the best of a difficult circumstance and receive her visit.

¹ This sermon was preached on the Third Sunday of Advent when joy is a key theme of the day.

Ray glanced toward the parking lot – there was no sign of Lana yet, and then he glanced for the umpteenth time at the telephone by his bed. It was still silent. He had hoped that Stan or Suzie might call him today; he had even thought about calling them. He wondered why he couldn't talk to his own children the way he talked with Lana.

When at last Lana appeared she switched on the overhead light in Ray's room and entered in bearing gifts. She had a miniature Christmas tree to put on Ray's window sill, and a small plate of Christmas cookies. "Merry Christmas Ray!" she said, presenting her treasures.

"Thank you," Ray said, "Merry Christmas to you. And how is Lana today?"

"Really great!" Lana said. And Ray could tell that she meant it.

She returned the question, "How are you?"

"I'm good," Ray answered. But Lana could tell he was not.

Ray insisted that she should share the cookies with him and dispatched her to the nurses' station to get a Coke for herself and a coffee for him. And soon they settled into their familiar routine of playing checkers while they talked.

Lana, for her part, was more chatty than usual, telling stories about work and about her friends; and Ray, for his part, was more quiet than usual, but still putting up a good front.

Ray commented, "You seem to be in an awfully good mood today."

"I am," Lana said, "Why shouldn't I be? I'm a notorious troublemaker in the community; I'm soon to lose my job; my mother and I can't speak for two seconds without arguing; and I'm stuck living with my parents because I'm out of money and out of options. What's there to be down about!? ...The truth is Ray, I'm happy because I have a present for you."

"The cookies and tree are wonderful; thank you Lana."

"Not those," she said, "I've got another present for you."

"Lana, why did you buy me a present?!"

"Don't worry, it's not that kind of present Ray. I told you I don't have any money. ...My present to you is that I went to church last Sunday."

"That's great Lana," Ray said, "and that's not only a present to me, I hope it's a present for you also."

"I think it was Ray," Lana said, "and I don't think I would have gone if you hadn't encouraged me, so I wanted to tell you."

"That's really good Lana; keep it up. And did you listen the way I told you to?"

"I think so," Lana said. "The sermon got a little long – you know Pastor Maxwell – but I really did try to listen and, like you said, to think how the words were for me – especially the words about God's forgiveness."

"Good," Ray said. "You know Helen always told the kids: 'church can be the best place on earth or the most boring place on earth – it just depends on where your heart is.'"

Ray's recollection of Helen brought him to sudden silence. The emptiness suddenly loomed large within him and he stared out the window, lost in thought for an unnaturally long period of time.

"What's the matter, Ray?" Lana finally asked, "and don't say everything's okay because I know something is wrong."

"It's just a hard day for me," he answered. "It's D-day, as I call it. The day Helen died. It was three years ago today."

"I'm very sorry Ray."

"It's all right," Ray said, "I just miss her a lot."

Lana said, "Can I ask how Mrs. Mertz died?"

"It was a brain aneurism," he said. "She went out Christmas shopping with a friend and I got a phone call later that day that she was gone – there was nothing they could do. It all happened so fast; she was there one minute and the next she was gone. It bothers me that I never really told her how much she meant to me. I didn't even say goodbye to her on that day and I miss her so much."

Lana nodded her head in sympathetic understanding. She could feel the weight of Ray's sadness. "Ray," she said "you're the one who's always reminding me about God, maybe it's my turn to remind you. Mrs. Mertz is with Jesus. She's in heaven. Ray, she knows that you love her, so don't let that bother you. And someday you will see her again. And right now Jesus is with you to help you."

Ray said, "That's very sweet Lana, I appreciate that more than you know. I think we all need to be reminded of the things that we already know.

...You know, my Helen she was a great Christian woman, I never told her how much I admired her for that – for her faith and dedication – all her work at church and other places. I don't think I would be a Christian today if it weren't for her."

"Ray, did I ever tell you that Mrs. Mertz was one of my Sunday school teachers?"

"No you didn't," said Ray, "but that sounds about right, she must have taught Sunday school for thirty years. She really loved it."

"I remember how nice she was," Lana said. "She'd talk about how Jesus loved us and died for us, and she made us feel that love. And do you know what I remember best? It was the songs. She taught us, 'This Little Gospel Light of Mine, I'm Gonna Let it Shine' and 'Jesus Loves Me, This I Know' and the joy song."

"I don't think I know that one," Ray said.

"You know it," Lana said, "'I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart...down in my heart, down in my heart.' You know that don't you?"

"Yes – I remember it now," said Ray, "that was one of Helen's favorites. Sometimes I could even hear her singing it in the kitchen, and I can see that great smile of hers while she sang. She really had that joy, you know – down in her heart."

"Yes she did," Lana said. "And so do you Ray. I know that because you've been sharing it with me all these weeks now – telling me about Jesus' love – just like Mrs. Mertz used to. ...Ray, I know you miss your wife very much, and I know that today is probably not an easy day for you, but you still have that joy in you, even today."

"I'm guess I'm just not feeling it Lana."

"Ray," she said, "maybe joy is something more than just feeling happy. Maybe joy is

something deeper than that.”

When that tear rolled down Raymond’s cheek, even he wasn’t sure if it was sadness or joy. It was likely a little of both.

...Two years ago when Ray moved into New Horizons, he made fun of the nursing home’s overly optimistic name. “Who are they kidding,” he joked, “we’re not looking for any new horizons here, we’re just waiting for that big sundown to come.” But somehow, unlooked for, on this past Friday afternoon, a new horizon came – the Dayspring from on high appeared. Lana had walked into Ray’s dark room and turned on the light. She brought him the gift of joy that only Jesus can give.

In just a little more than a week you and I will arrive at the shortest day of the year and with it the longest, darkest night of the year. In some ways that growing darkness outside seems emblematic of the darkness of these times in which we now live. Ours is a world of restless evil, of growing unbelief, a world increasingly bereft of meaning and hope.

But into such a world – into this world – Jesus, our Savior, was born. In the darkness of mid-winter, when every earthly light was dimmed, Jesus, the Light of the World dawned upon us with life and hope from heaven.

By His birth among us, by His atoning death for our sins on that dark Good Friday when the sun hid its light – Jesus has brought us the sunshine of God’s own love and forgiveness, and the promise of everlasting life.

Even if this holy season may, for some of us, be clouded over by grief and loss, the deep and true joy of the Newborn light still shines for us with undiminished power and with the expectation of a new and better Day to come.

“The people who walked in darkness, have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.”

Come, O Dayspring, our Joy. Amen.

The peace of God which passes human understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

SERMON SIX

Date: December 20, 2015

Title: Come O King of Nations, our Peace

Text: *Isaiah 2:4 He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.*

Beloved in the Lord, grace, mercy, and peace be with you, from God our Father and from Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Come, O King of Nations, Our Peace

If you've ever visited the United Nations Building in New York City, you may have noticed the small park directly across the street. In that park you will find a large granite wall which faces the UN Building, and on that wall, carved in large letters you will read the words of the Prophet Isaiah: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."

The Isaiah Wall, as that is called, is not really part of the United Nations complex, it's in a New York City park, but it's difficult not to see a connection between the two. An end to war between the nations, Isaiah promised it, and the United Nations was founded in the hope of accomplishing it.

Peace on Earth – that's something we hear an awful lot about this time of year, and with good reason – it's the message that God's angels sang on that first Christmas night. But that peace of which the angels sang, and the end of warfare among the nations of which Isaiah spoke, is not a political peace made by governments or international organizations, the peace among nations that the Bible describes is the peace which God Himself accomplishes and gives through His saving Gospel which is preached to all nations.

By that Good News of Jesus Christ – who was born for us all, and who died for our salvation – the Holy Spirit is uniting people from every nation in His One Holy, Christian, and Apostolic Church. By the death of His Son, God has reconciled the whole world to Himself – He has made peace – and He is calling people from every country, every tribe, every skin color, and every language, to be united to Him in the peace of His kingly reign.

And being at peace with Him by His grace, our Savior King now calls us to be at peace with one another. Christ calls for reconciliation among the peoples of the earth and He calls for healing in every relationship among humankind.

For as surely as the nations have learned the art of war, so individuals have learned to make war with one another. Marriages, families, churches, and friendships are torn apart by conflict. Like weapons, words are hurled back and forth with devastating effect. And

even if the causalities of those wars are not found in hospitals or cemeteries, they are causalities all the same.

In every place where such warfare and injury is found – Jesus our King of peace seeks to magnify His reign that those who have found peace in Him might come to make peace with one another.

One last time I invite you to come with me to the New Horizons Living Center, as we listen in to our friends Ray and Lana as they share their weekly visit together.

There was an explosion at Lana's house on Friday. Not the kind of explosion made by a bomb but the kind of explosion that was becoming all too regular at the Perez household. Lana and her mother got into a shouting match that was hurtful and ugly.

When Lana arrived at Ray's room she was thirty-five minutes early. Normally Ray would have been watching out his window for her arrival, but that day she caught him by surprise. She couldn't think of where else to go. She needed to vent her anger and pain, and despite the nearly 60 year difference in their ages, Ray had become her confidant and friend.

"Hey Ray," Lana said, "I know I'm early, is that okay?"

"It's more than okay," Ray said, "Come on in. Have a seat. I've got a little something for you." He held out a red envelope with her name printed neatly on the front.

"Ray can we talk?"

"Sure," he said, setting down the card. "What's up?"

"It's mom," she said. "We had a big fight today and I don't know what to do."

"What was the fight about?" Ray asked.

"I don't even know. I don't even remember what started it. But it always ends up being the same stupid stuff over and over again. She's disappointed in me that I got in so much trouble. She hates my friends because they're a bad influence. She wants me to go back to college. She wants me to grow up and start acting like an adult – to be more like Tammy. She actually said that today – that I should be more like my baby sister."

"And what did you say?" Ray asked.

"I can't say, Ray – not to you. It was bad. I shouldn't have said it, but I was just so mad. What she said hurt me so much I just wanted to hurt her back."

"So now what?" Ray asked.

"I don't know," Lana said. "I don't want to go back there but I don't really have a choice. I guess we'll just avoid each other for a while and things will get better."

"Do you think that will solve the problem?" Ray asked. "Your mother still said what she said and you still said what you said. You're mad and she's mad. You're hurt and she's hurt. That won't go away by ignoring it. Things might get better for a little while that way but they're just going to blow up again – unless you do something to fix it."

"I don't want to fix this Ray!"

"You want to stay mad forever?"

“Yes.” Lana said.

“What do you think Christ would say about that?” Ray asked.

“That’s not fair Ray, you’re supposed to be on my side.”

“Lana, I am on your side, and I’m also on the side of you and your mom making peace. And that means that I’m on the side of forgiveness, because that’s the only way that any of us can go forward. We can’t go back and unsay or undo anything, but we can forgive someone ...and ask them to forgive us.”

“Lana, sin is so terrible – how it divides us from one another. Sometimes all we see is our own hurt and we’re blind to the wrong that we have done. And sometimes we get so mad at someone else that no matter what they do or say – it hits us wrong. If somebody else did or said the same thing we wouldn’t even think about it, but our hearts get hardened so easily. ...Lana don’t let that happen to you. You and your mom need to talk with one another – you need to forgive each other.”

“But Ray she’s the adult. Isn’t it her job to reach out to me?”

“You’re an adult too, Lana. Maybe in a perfect world, your mom should make the first move – but this isn’t a perfect world and way too many conflicts go on and on because everybody thinks it’s the other person who needs to make the first move. It’s pigheaded.”

“Are you calling me pigheaded?” Lana said, astounded.

“I’m sorry Lana. That was wrong. I think I was talking more to myself than to you, so please forgive me. It’s just that I hear you talking about yourself and your mother and it gets me thinking about how pigheaded I’ve been with my kids. I barely talk to them anymore. I haven’t talked to Stan for more than a month...and I haven’t really talked to him for a whole lot longer than that. I keep waiting for him to call. And I say to myself ‘why should I always be the one who reaches out? It’s his turn, if he cares.’ And so I don’t call. And he doesn’t call. And we don’t talk, and nothing ever gets solved.”

“I’m sorry Ray. And it’s okay that you called me pigheaded. Sometimes I am.”

“It still wasn’t right Lana. Please forgive me.”

“I do.”

“Thank you.”

“Lana, I’ve been think about something that I want to run it by you.”

Ray turned around in his wheelchair and picked up his small white Bible from the nightstand. He leafed through to a page somewhere in the middle. “Here it is,” he said, “Isaiah, chapter 2: “He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

“Lana, I’ve heard that passage many times through the years. Even before I started reading the Bible I knew about it, and in all the times I heard and read those words I never really thought about what they said until lately. Listen: ‘They shall beat their

swords into plowshares.'

Can you imagine how much work that would be? Think about taking a metal sword that's shaped one way and then hammering and hammering and hammering at that sword until it had another shape altogether. Even if you had a really hot furnace it would be very hard work. If that's how God describes people making peace, why would we imagine that making peace would be easy? When we have conflict we need to hammer it out, and hammer it out, and hammer it again, working and working at it until finally that sword is a plowshare.

Lana, Jesus loves us so much. He has forgiven us so many things and every day He heals the relationship that we break. I think about that Lana, how Jesus, forgives me and loves even though I don't deserve it at all. And I think about how He stuck His neck out to make peace with me – or really I should say He stuck His arms out to make peace with me. Maybe I can risk making a phone call to my son. And then keep on calling him, for as long as it takes until things are right between us.

Lana, please talk with your mother. ... Work at this. ... Make it right."

"I'm scared." Lana said.

"You don't need to be," Ray told her, "Jesus is with you. ... Can you and I pray about this?"

"Yes," said Lana.

...Jesus said, "Blessed are the peace-makers."

You and I are now only a few days away from the celebration of Christmas and the declaration of God's peace on earth through the birth of His only Son. If there is someone in your life from whom you are now estranged – if there is someone in your life with whom you are now in conflict – now is the time – strike while the iron is hot. Make peace with that person, or at least make the beginning of peace, reach out, start hammering at, and keep doing that for as long as it takes.

Jesus Christ– the great Peacemaker – who has united the nations in Himself – has given you the gift of peace with Him by His death for your sake. He will equip you to make peace. He will strengthen you and help you.

Come, O King of Nations, our Peace, rule in our hearts and lives today. Amen.

The Peace of God guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

APPENDIX G

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

1. *The following format guided the conversation for the final interviews but they were not rigidly followed. The intent was to have a free flowing discussion that would allow for authentic responses.*

Opening Statements

- Thank you for this opportunity to sit down with you and for your patient listening to the sermon series.
- I will be making some notes as we talk to capture your responses. Can I have your permission to make an audio tape for my personal use to make sure that my notes are accurate?

Questions

1. How would you characterize your overall impressions of the sermon series with Ray and Lana?
2. Can you think of a part of the story or a message from that series that stuck with you, or which made a strong impact upon you?
3. What would you say is the most memorable thing about the sermon series?
4. Compared to the typical kind of sermon you have heard me preach, would you say that the stories with Ray and Lana were more or less helpful in applying God's Word to people's daily life?
5. Can you think of a time when the events in the story of Ray and Lana were immediately applicable to things that were happening in your life?
6. What did you hear others saying about these sermons?
7. Each sermon began and ended with a short section that was written like a typical sermon. Can you think of any specific material from the opening or closing portions of any of the sermons that was particularly memorable?
8. The characters Ray and Lana lived in our present time and talked about how God's Word intersected their lives. Do you think that helps people hearing that kind of story to think about how the Word of God applies to their own life today?

9. Ray and Lana were repeating characters that we came to know over a period of weeks. Although the stories were inter-related across the six weeks, they were largely stand-alone stories. It would have been possible to tell the same kind lesson using different characters each week. Do you think there was benefit having the same characters appear week after week? (Please be as specific as possible.)
10. Did you talk about these sermons with anyone else and if so would you be willing to share the nature of those conversations?
11. The sermon series you heard was six weeks long. For this kind of sermon series, with repeating characters in a story arc, what do you think a good length would be?
12. What didn't work for you in this sermon series? What didn't you like? What would you have preferred to be different?
13. The hope in this series was to provide sermons that would help the hearers apply the Word of God to their personal lives. In your view how successful was that endeavor?
14. What does Ray look like; what does Lana look like?
15. Is there anything else you would like me to know?
16. Do you have any questions for me?

2. *Verbatim Reports*

A complete transcription of the one-on-one interviews can be made available upon request. What follows are reports of the key and representative answers given by each of the interviewees. The letter assigned to each person corresponds to the order in which they were interviewed. Personally identifying names and statements have been redacted in order to protect the confidentiality of those interviewed.

1. How would you characterize your overall impressions of the sermon series with Ray and Lana?

- A. I so enjoyed them. Every week I got a new perspective on something. A different way to look at something. They really brought the lesson to life.
- B. I thought the stories were great. I thought they were real-life stories. I thought everyone could relate. ... I was looking at it more from Ray's perspective than from Lana's.
- C. I liked it actually. I thought it was an interesting approach...It brought you into the present. There were things I could really relate to and things I couldn't, more to Ray's perspective I think.

- D. The kids were into it. The serialized story [was of interest]. / There were parts of the series that did a very good job of describing specific aspects of life in those different ages...I couldn't help wondering, where are you going with this? Why did you bring that in? / The middle two were my favorites as stand-alone sermons. / There wasn't that big pay off at the end – like we've really been on a journey. / It had that packaged feel to it.
- E. I thought they were fabulous. But I'm the type of person that hearing a story that I can relate to helps me to follow the message. I found myself wanting more. I couldn't wait to hear the next saga. / Every Sunday when I walked out of here during those six sermons not only did I understand the message but I was able to talk about it. I was able to express to someone else who didn't come to hear the sermon what the sermon was about.
- F. It felt soap-opera-ish, or [like] reality TV, in that you kept seeing the same characters over and over again. Which gave you a chance to get the backstories on them and understand what brought them to where they were at that point and time. / If you'd just mentioned them once in your sermon as you've done so many times, then you don't really have the backstories to determine: What was Ray doing in the nursing home? What led up to that? What was his life up to that point? Why was Lana there? You know that there was a reason for her being there other than the goodness of her heart, which came out in the first one, so what motivated her to be there.
- G. I didn't love them at first because I had too many questions – “Why is Lana stuck going in there?” But then it became almost like a soap opera. ...Around the third or fourth I wanted to know what was going to happen. / When you got to Joy and Redeemer those really impacted. / Toward the end I really connected with both of the characters and what I was learning through them – through what you were trying to teach – the theme.
- H. I liked the whole thing. I thought it was interesting. / It kept your attention week to week because you were wondering what was happening next. / I could see it being a recurring thing but not all the time. Bringing them back. / You could get a picture of the weekly idea and I liked watching them grow. / It brought more of a humanizing thing to the sermon I guess. ...You weren't just speaking in broad terms. They were actually applied to people. And most people probably figured they were one of the two so it would be more personalized to them in a way.

2. Can you think of a part of the story or a message from that series that stuck with you, or which made a strong impact upon you?

- A. What impacted me the most was being able to see things through Lana's eyes. How she felt about how people treated her. That's something I don't spend enough time thinking about. / It was the third or fourth sermon where she kept calling herself a “screw up”. At the beginning I thought of her as someone who was being defiant and that gave me a different perspective.
- B. When Ray was anxiously anticipating her coming. / She thought he was kind of a Bible-thumper and then when he told her, “Oh no I'm not that pure. I've sinned.” And he was kind of ashamed. “I'm a sinful man too.” / The last one...on hammering the plowshares and swords and the hard work. I thought that was a really good sermon.
- C. Where Lana confesses to Ray why she's there and he talks to her about forgiveness and confession. That one really hit. Sometimes for me it's really hard to talk to people about

the Lord and he had a very soft way of bringing her attention to it. / I guess too I saw this guy as a man who lived with some regrets...and I could relate to that.

- D. The relationship between Lana and her mother. ...That was always a damaged relationship and an anchor on Lana's life view. / You have an artist's touch...bringing imagery. The single best image I have is about Ray talking to Lana about how his Bible should be more beaten up and dirty – I feel the same way about mine so it talked a little too close to my heart.
- E. The sermon where Ray talked about his Bible...where it wasn't worn...the whole point of that sermon did hit home with me.
- F. Yeah, it was towards the end. The theme was Stump of Jesse. ...That one and Dayspring were the two...tied to the hymn that stuck out in my mind. / The one about Ray losing his wife was powerful for me. Maybe it's because that's where I'm at in my life. I'm getting older. / Her dealing with the frustration of her life talking about why she was there, the community service that she had to do. They were powerful. / I think about family members [in the nursing home] and wishing I could go back and redo it and pay more attention to them, which gave us a chance to do some talking.
- G. When you got to the Redeemer that one really hurt and hit hard...where Lana talks about how can she be forgiven? ... That one touched me because maybe that's where I am at in my walk. How can I possibly be forgiven? / The Joy one was fabulous because it was about Ray discussing his loss, how he was down, and we've all been in a position where we were in a valley or something. / I actually kind of started being nosey and looked around at other people. And I noticed an elderly woman who lost her husband...and I saw tears just running down her face and I'm like okay so it's connecting to her as well and I could see where that could have really impacted probably quite a few of our congregation where they've experience loss of that one deep loved one and just trying to find Joy after that.
- H. Probably how Lana was very hesitant to go there at the beginning and then by the end she was actually there more than what she needed because she just found someone to talk to, that showed her different views and helped her grow as a person while she helped Ray also. They were complementary to each other but you didn't think they would be at the very beginning.

3. What would you say is the most memorable thing about the sermon series?

This question was unasked since it was generally answered by the question above.

4. Compared to the typical kind of sermon you have heard me preach, would you say that the stories with Ray and Lana were more or less helpful in applying God's Word to people's daily life?

- A. I think they were – I don't know if I would use the word "helpful" but they were more I guess I would say "lifelike." / We think of Jesus' time as being those ancient of days when there was nothing like we are today and it brought out the fact that it is the same. / Not necessarily for me [better than a typical sermon] but I think definitely for others.
- B. Personally I like hearing the Gospel stories... I can see how those stories relate to the stories [but] those are your interpretation of the Gospel stories. / I could see where some people could see themselves in that position.

- C. There are times I need a story and there are times I need a regular sermon...I would say that if it was always stories people would fall away from it and lose interest in it. / I like stories. I like hearing how things relate to people. ...Taking a portion of Scripture and applying it to today in a story perspective probably helps me out a little more. It gives me a new way of looking at a Biblical text. And how what Jesus was telling them then applies to me today. / But I also see that for some people like [name] the sermon portion really benefits them. Finding that balance of tradition and continuity with putting fresh spirit in it [is the goal].
- D. I was relieved when it was over because your sermons in general I find more stimulating and more nourishing...more beneficial to my spiritual welfare than those sermons. It didn't feel to me as if there was nearly the depth. / For people who are younger in their faith...this would be far more useful...illustrating how real life benefits of knowing the Bible and seeing how it applies to real life. / It's a little safer to talk about [the sermon with characters as opposed to typical sermons.] / You have these characters that you can refer to in future sermons. The potential utility of Ray and Lana...we know who you mean when you say Ray and Lana...that's a reference point that you don't have with other sermons.
- E. I will tell you that I have described you as a thunderous preacher...you're passionate and your sermons are moving...but the Ray and Lana story, there was something about that...I understood the message...I could relate it to personal experiences, life experiences. / "All those sins are forgiven" that's the message Ray was trying to get to Lana. / Even though I take away something every Sunday from the sermon I felt I took away more from the Ray and Lana series, just because it was everyday stuff that you could relate to.
- F. I think they were helpful...Personally, I like your other sermons better. I get more thoughts from those. ...I will remember the series because it was different. It was a very, very different format and there will be references, "do you remember when...?" / The read script rather than you just speaking to us. I like it better when you just speak to us. Maybe it's because I'm more used to it.
- G. I thought that maybe...you weren't comfortable in relaying the sermon in that way. But you seemed more confident as time went on. It was almost more read [at first and there was more feeling and you weren't on the script as time went on. / I don't believe you need the series to do it...You can do that in just one story. / I needed to hear what was going to happen next so I made sure I was there but I also had to re-listen to some of them if I wasn't focused enough.
- H. More. ...When you're actually telling a story people are paying more attention. And you're able to craft it into their lives. And if people know it's going to be an ongoing they'd be interested to find out what would happen. And I bet that if people missed a week they probably went back and listened to it at the website. Normally if you miss a week and it's just a regular sermon you might not go back but if there's a story to it you might [go back] "what happened?" / They're both good but this one was just better in a way.

5. Can you think of a time when the events in the story of Ray and Lana were immediately applicable to things that were happening in your life?

- A. Yes. At this point in her life [name] thinks she's lost and feels about [name] the way Lana does to her mother and it helped me to see things from Lana's side. / You try to guide them in a way that you think is best for them but they don't see it that way. Yeah, that hit home. I think I cried three out of four sermons in church.
- B. There was a couple. In fact I wasn't sure if you knew about me or what. ...I think that's why they were easy to follow.
- C. Lana was saying that her mother was trying to run her life and tell her what to do and I could go there immediately...so yes.
- D. n/a
- E. No.
- F. Within my family we talked about them. It was interesting hearing what [husband] said about them versus [daughter] versus me. Sometimes we all heard the same thing and sometimes [we heard it differently]. We all got the points you were making in the sermon. ...We made a point to talk about it. / Some actual words [of the story] jumped out at me about [children.] / The impact of the loneliness, I thought about a lot. What's it going to be like if I'm alone? Am I going to be like Ray? Could I handle it like he did? / [Ray] watching the parking lot reminded me of [relatives] at [nursing home] and how much they would look forward to our visits.
- G. Yes, definitely the Redeemer one. It applied to my life immediately. That one made me have tears in my eyes. For me it's hard to accept forgiveness and listening to her struggle with everything she had done wrong and where can she go from here ...I was able to apply immediately.
- H. [A personally identifying story was told.]

6. What did you hear others saying about these sermons?

- A. Amongst our family I heard a lot. We talked about them every week and all of it was good.
- B. I think we did talk about it once or twice when it started at the donut hour.
- C. [Spouse] liked the stories and really felt that [with a story] you could really apply it today.
- D. [Kids] were more edified by the sermon because they don't have the experience. / [Wife] found them moderately more useful than I did. I still found them useful. You set a standard that is so high. / There was some discussion going on [in the congregation], people who weren't here all the time were trying to catch up. / [From a discussion with a spouse:] This would be a sermon series that a lesser-gifted pastor would use to raise his level...it felt like you were confined by this. Most of your sermons are going to hit and 8, 9, or 10 these were more a 7 or 8.
- E. I know [name] thoroughly enjoyed it. She could understand and got a lot out of it. Not only did she hear but she understood.
- F. The one thing that a couple of them said they didn't like...they didn't like [it read] to them.
- G. [Name] listened to them. She thought the same thing. It sounded shaky in the beginning. When I called her and told her she needed to listen to the Redeemer one...she had the same thoughts. The joy one as well. / My big concern was that one day at church I noticed that someone new came in. He came in right before the sermon...Is he going to

be able to follow along? / [Spouse] liked them. I didn't ask him but he said "I liked them" and my husband is very sure of his thoughts for him to say that...that's worth something.

H. Not a lot. People liked it just because it was different – you never hear ongoing ones. I never hear something like this and people haven't either. / You would actually hear people talk about the two characters after church when normally they wouldn't even talk about the sermon at all unless you used a prop or something.

7. Each sermon began and ended with a short section that was written like a typical sermon. Can you think of any specific material from the opening or closing portions of any of the sermons that was particularly memorable?

A. I liked the idea of it being the six "O's" and learning something new about each one and I did. For some reason the "joy" one is sticking out to me. About the joy of being here.

B. n/a

C. The one message was about Wisdom [Week One]. And it was just one simple statement that Jesus is the embodiment of Wisdom.

D. I don't think so.

E. I listened to the second sermon on my laptop. I listened twice [because of noise in church]... That was the one on Adonai and that beginning...it stuck with me, it's fascinating.

F. The ones where you related to Dayspring and Stump of Jesse. / It took a while to get into that format.

G. No. I'm sorry I can't.

H. I remember the Wisdom one where you said that people...might be smart but not wise. And people uneducated are probably the wise ones compared to the smart ones. / I'm not sure which one it was but the one of kings, with the seven sons or six sons. / I can remember the story between the characters but I can't remember the beginning or end for most of them.

8. The characters Ray and Lana lived in our present time and talked about how God's Word intersected their lives. Do you think that helps people hearing that kind of story to think about how the Word of God applies to their own life today?

A. I think maybe more for younger people. / I enjoy sermons and I enjoy historical sermons. More like a lesson than a sermon. I enjoy that kind of things. But I'm not so sure we're very good at applying that today. So yes I think it would a lot of people apply the Word today.

B. Older people – this could relate to them. And the younger people probably could relate more to Lana. I'm in that area in between.

C. Yes. I think putting it into today's context helps people in relating God's Word to their situation and it's hard for people sometimes to.

D. Yes. That was certainly one of the things I like about it [that it was contemporary].

E. I can follow either one. [A Bible times story or a contemporary story.] Can I say that I like one more than the other. But when you don't include a story I have a hard time following...the brain goes somewhere else.

- F. I think it does. Some people can't make the transitions. They can't get it. You have to make the connections for them to get them to see it.
- G. Yes. I think so. I definitely think so. ...I'm going to assume that some of the young people in the congregation were affected by what Lana was experiencing and it spoke to them and the older people were able to with Ray. So I thought it was a great combination. / Yes I think it needs to be set in contemporary times sometimes...to let us all know that even now what we're going through, with technology or whatever those struggles are now...there are new things that we battle with which are ways we can then sin.
- H. Yes, because it is here and now – things that are happening to them could happen to you or someone you know. Compared to something in the past that wouldn't be relative today. / Any of these characters could be your neighbor or could be you. But if it was biblical you might [think] "this is just a story." / You think of [this story] as ongoing. ...Being in the here-and-now you don't know what's going to happen.

9. Ray and Lana were repeating characters that we came to know over a period of weeks. Although the stories were inter-related across the six weeks, they were largely stand-alone stories. It would have been possible to tell the same kind of stories using different characters each week. Do you think there was benefit having the same characters appear week after week? (Please be as specific as possible.)

- A. Yes. I think it's the same effect why people watch soap operas. You get to know the people even though you never met them. / I don't necessarily think that would be good all the time. But in short segments like that, like six weeks, eight weeks, and then maybe not do it for a while and then do it again. I think it pulls you in.
- B. I think it's better the way it was presented instead of different people. / You could have mixed it up...maybe next time maybe use a different age group.
- C. The episode that hit me about how she felt about her mother. That could have been a whole separate story with different characters – it would have hit me just the same as being in the continuum of Ray and Lana. / For some people it might have a bigger impact because they start to get to know those characters and find more and more to relate to. I kind of take each event on its own merits. / I think as a whole people like the familiar.
- D. Having them be for future reference. I'm curious to see in a year from now if I think of Ray and Lana.
- E. I'm going to say yes and no. ...It could have been two different people each week but you didn't end the story every Sunday. The story kept going...[You left us] wanting more. If you had ended the story every Sunday, would I have wanted as much more coming in the following Sunday? ... Because it continued week after week I'm the type of person that I love to watch drama on TV. I like the [shows] that keep me coming back for more. / To me if you want to go back and use it for anything you can...Let's say six months from now you want to revisit Ray and Lana...than it's still an open book. It's also to the point where I can sit back and say, "She's continuing to go visit him...he's continued to help her to grow and learn and come to terms with her life and her mom."
- F. Wouldn't have been a soap opera if you had changed characters. I think it was [beneficial] in that you got to see the backstories. / [Ray] was a real person who had great emotions. He had been through a lot and it helped me appreciate his perspective more. And the same thing with Lana.

- G. I don't know if it was a benefit or not...It helped me to [get to know those characters]. I have a connection to them.
- H. Yes because you got to see how they would grow with each other compared to just two random characters. And while the story could be the same it probably wouldn't have the same impact. / Just like Ray looking out the window every time looking for Lana and when she came unexpectedly the one day...but if you had just random stories, one-off's that would be like a regular sermon almost...You're still saying the sermon but you're not connecting with the characters because they're changing all the time. / By repeating the characters you gain attachment to them.

10. Did you talk about these sermons with anyone else and if so would you be willing to share the nature of those conversations?

This question had some overlap with #6 and the answers for both are recorded there.

11. The sermon series you heard was six weeks long. For this kind of sermon series, with repeating characters in a story arc, what do you think a good length would be?

- A. [Six weeks is not too long.] I'm not sure I'd go more than eight.
- B. If you know how long it's going to be...like if you know it's going to be six or nine weeks...If you have a projected time then you can kind of anticipate what might happen. How this might end. I don't think it was too long.
- C. Six weeks was probably lengthier than would hold attention for some people. It didn't really bother me. ...Social media is changing the way our brain functions and we read different and we think different.People don't have the longevity of thought process so six weeks is probably a little long. I think three weeks or four weeks is really good for a continuum.
- D. As a whole I think you would have been better served to make it four weeks instead of six.
- E. I was sorry to see it end. ...I got more out of that sermon series than I have in a really long time. For me, it could have never ended. I'm not saying it had to be Ray and Lana but whatever the storyline would become. That kind of a series really did work for me. / Would I like to see more sermons done that way? Yes. But I do find most of the time that your sermons I can follow them. I don't find myself drifting off to somewhere else and having to bring myself back...
- F. Your goal for the series would dictate the length. [For instance if you did the six weeks of Lent or Ten Commandments]. / It did go on a bit. Six [weeks] was long.
- G. Maybe three powerhouse ones. ...Three Sundays in a row.
- H. You don't want it to be too short. You want it to be at least three. But six – you don't want it to be longer than six because people come and go and might miss it. / Three to four would be about the base line to establish the characters. / It also helps if you say at the beginning that it's going to be “this long.” Because people who might not pay attention to the first one may not realize that there will be a second one. So I think that helped out also, saying they'll be six of them “here we go.”

12. What didn't work for you in this sermon series? What didn't you like? What would you have preferred to be different?

- A. I can't think of anything I didn't like. There were one or two where I had a little bit of difficulty relating the beginning [of the sermon] to the story. And in both those cases, in the end, after the story, you kind of tied it together. But I didn't necessarily get the full impact between the two [introduction of theme and story]. And maybe it was that day I just wasn't concentrating as well.
- B. I didn't think anything wasn't working. Two or three times it related directly to me. I don't know that I would change anything other than...put another character maybe in a different age group. It could have been expanded instead of a one-on-one.
- C. [Making it] about four weeks long – that's the only thing. / You could also do that series and use actual people from the congregation. Like a skit. / Personally, I would have liked different characters because I am curious about how things relate to all different people.
- D. Those sermons did not have the things that I find the most nourishing.
- E. As far as the sermon series went I thought everything worked.
- F. Sometimes when you set up the scene and then read [the story] and it wasn't always joined well. Maybe if you just read [the story] and at the end tie it to theme. Kind of like the commentator who tell you later what you should think about what just happened.
- G. I would want to know the problem [Lana] was having [up front]. In most stories the problem is introduced right away. I was anxious to know.
- H. The beginning of the sermon and the story were too different. / I remember two of the six [beginnings] and I remember all of the stories....

13. The hope in this series was to provide sermons that would help the hearers apply the Word of God to their personal lives. In your view how successful was that endeavor?

- A. Yes.
- B. A couple times I thought you were directly relating to me and I could see how that was following the Gospel or the reading itself. Things that happened in Jesus' time what would it look like in our time? If there were a modern day disciple what would they be doing?
- C. It was very successful for me because there were things that opened to me. And it wasn't the story, that's the interesting thing. I liked the story but it was actually your simple opening about Wisdom that had the most impact on me – looking at Jesus differently. / What was cool about [the series] was that it represented all the different names of Jesus and all the gifts He came down to bring us. So I really enjoyed this series.
- D. The titles [of Christ themes] meant nothing to me. / For me the benefit to anyone was to [see] that the Bible still holds wisdom and guidance for how we are to live our lives. I think that part was extremely successful.
- E. I thought it was very successful for me.
- F. It made me think about my [family], how I treat people, how I have treated people in the past. What I should be doing. It's like you held a big mirror out there. It made me really think about my life.
- G. n/a
- H. More successful than normal. / They were better than normal – just being honest.

14. What does Ray look like; what does Lana look like?

Ray

- A. Ray has thinning hair but he still has a whole head of hair. It's grey. I can see him. He's light skinned. He's thin. He's got a long neck.
- B. Wheelchair bound. Probably 80 years old. Balding, glasses.
- C. He was a little bit like my dad but skinnier. I saw him as a thin, older guy. He wasn't as happy and cuddly as my dad. This guy had some issues. He struggled. ...I felt there was some sort of disability; he was not able to move around much.
- D. Pastor Blankenbeuler. / A little of Art Rooney
- E. Ray is white; white hair; glasses; a thin man; not very tall, but not very frail either.
- F. He is probably about 5'7", 5'8" and he is thin, most likely because He wasn't eating right after Helen died.... I think he wears glasses. He has grey hair although he was a brunette at one point in time.
- G. Ray was tall, slender, he had more white-ish hair with a little pepper in it.
- H. He's in a wheelchair. He doesn't have the use of his legs anymore for some reason. Or he just doesn't want to. He's a balding old guy with like a gruffy grey beard. Who has glasses he doesn't wear all the time.

Lana

- A. Lana is about 5'5", 5'6". She's got long straight black hair. She doesn't have glasses. She doesn't wear much makeup. At this point her eyes are sad.
- B. Young. Long hair. Lipstick. Dresses. She could have been trappy because she was in trouble.
- C. Trouble. I saw Lana as this girl with dark hair. Physically fit. Kind of a medium build, attractive girl, but that attitude, her smirky, proud attitude.
- D. I don't have as good a picture of her. She's short. She's like 5'2". She's got to have some tattoos.
- E. Lana is a spitfire. White; brunette; short and not very thin either but I'm not going to say overweight, medium build.
- F. She's a brunette. She is not a full figures gal but she is not real thin either...Long dark hair and doesn't wear glasses. Doesn't dress with the trends but more traditional in dress. Not the latest in styles but not twenty years behind either.
- G. Lana was slender with longish dark hair. Pretty. / Neither one of them wore glasses.
- H. I figured at the very beginning she's just like a college girl...but then you find out she's a deeper person who actually cares what people think. [She's] taller, like 5'8". For some reason I thought it was like blonde hair. [She] would keep up with the latest fashions. Like a party girl.

15. Is there anything else you would like me to know?

- A. There was one week when something was coming up and I wasn't sure I was going to get to church. And I remember thinking I have to hear that story; I can't miss one. And it wasn't that you had asked me to listen, it's because I didn't want to miss that part. And I wanted to get it in person. I didn't want to get it off the internet, or hear what other people said. I wanted it for me.

- B. n/a
- C. n/a
- D. n/a
- E. [About “reading” the storied portion of the sermons.] You read...like you were writing a book. You didn’t read it in a monotone voice. You gave life to Lana. You gave life to Ray. ...The beginning and end I thought you did “off the cuff” but when you did the story part you read a story. / I would like to think that you will consider doing another series sin a few months. I felt it really brought us into the Christmas season.
- F. I’m not real fond of this type of sermon. Go back to being you.
- G. n/a
- H. They should come back at some point – a reunion tour. Just to find out what would happen. Whether she would keep coming to visit. If they actually grew, like maybe she would bring him back to church if possible, or if she actually just moved away after her job was done...

16. Do you have any questions for me?

There were a few questions asked of me. This was a courtesy to my helpers and not part of my research.

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