

Preach the Word

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Joy and Confidence from the Basics - Part 3

By Mark Paustian

I watch a pastor from three rows behind and a little to the left. He is celebrating 25 years in the ministry. He is listening to a sermon with his face in his hands. His bride puts her hand on his shoulder and steals a glance. A big thing is happening right beside her.

The preacher up front is performing a great kindness by the picture he paints. He is depicting the Lord Christ as he walks among the lampstands that are the Good News churches, keeping them lit. His saving face is revealed in their soft, flickering light. But there is more. See, he is holding the stars of the churches—their pastors—in the palms of his hands.

What greater kindness is there than to search all possible means of communication, beginning with the images that sparkle and the narratives that unfold within the sermon text itself, all to inscribe the thing deeper, deeper in the bottom of a soul.

Reconciled to God. Kept. Held.

Why illustrate?

The pastor longs to show his people things—not just to tell them—and to have the truths of any given Sunday bore down through the head and into the heart. He would have those truths be all the more available for life by means of that high homiletical art we call illustration.

A good story—the truth-telling that disturbs, the ending that makes it worthwhile—is like good art. It creates a conversation for the car ride home. It leaves you with more to say than just, “My, wasn’t that nice.” It gives you something memorable on which to hang that day’s whole point.

And so, having expounded the meaning of our text, having captured the truth in clear and dramatic doctrinal assertions, the sort that Christians love, now we want to let this truth get up and walk around. We want to give it a human face. We want to set

things beside it to say, “This is what it’s like. This is how it looks. This is how it feels.”

Why tell stories?

The guru of narrative communication is named Walter Fisher (1931-2018). He happened to be a gentleman scholar of some Christian depth. He liked to say that people are fundamentally “storytelling creatures” [*homo narrans*] with brains hard-wired for narrative. Story is the form of communication that is most like life for the way it meets us in a steady sequence of events and ambiguities.

Fisher pushes back on what he calls the “rational world paradigm,” the view that the world meets us in a series of logical problems, and that being educated means being trained in the kind of critical thinking that can help us succeed in navigating such a world.

In contrast, children are enculturated from little on in what Fisher terms “narrative rationality,” the ability to think in stories. He saw *all* human communication as narration so that even greeting someone in the hallway is a story—it settles in our minds as an episode. Long after we may have forgotten every word our favorite teacher ever said to us—when all that content has long drained from our busy brains—what remains in episodic memory, perhaps for a lifetime, is how she made us feel. *That* we may take to our graves.

This goes to the profound “stickiness” of stories, especially those that draw on deep currents of feeling. Episodic memory—how we easily retain dozens of details in a well-told story—is vastly more powerful than eidetic memory—retrieving, say, a random seven-digit number.

Stories lodge like seeds in the soil of people's thoughts.

Think of Jesus' parables. Stories lodge like seeds in the soil of people's thoughts—even if they do not immediately understand the meaning that hides curled up and green inside the shell, perhaps one day, by the Spirit, they will.

Incidentally, please don't hear, "Once upon a time..." when I use the word "story" throughout this article. This is no small thing. At our insistence that the divinely inspired history recorded in the pages of the Bible is true, worlds hang in the balance.

And Fisher, too, was no postmodern. He had a correspondence view of truth—there are good stories and there are bad stories in terms of their claims on reality. He noticed competing stories about the way things are within the Bible itself—"Peace, peace," they say, when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14). Fisher understood that devil, world, and flesh persuade more by the slippery stories they tell than by anything remotely rational. He trusted the meta-narrative of Scripture, the grand story from garden to garden that reveals to us and to our children everything we really need to know: who God is, who we are, what's wrong with everything, where our redemption and hope are found.

They are found in Christ. Nothing else will do.

What makes a story work—what explains its influence—is when it has "narrative fidelity" and "narrative coherence." That is, it "rings true" and it "hangs together." With these qualities in place, stories carry within them what Fisher calls "good reasons"—to trust, to serve, to wait, to hope. For a fuller accounting of these ideas, Walter Fisher's groundbreaking book, *Human Communication as Narration*, is fascinating and accessible.

A good story doesn't need to be explained. Doing so may only break the spell. Good stories heal the rift between mind and emotion. The best stories leave no part of the prodigal untouched. As C. S. Lewis believed, they lower our defenses and "sneak past those watchful dragons" to deliver truth home. Lewis described



Good stories heal the rift between mind and emotion.

that the subsequent events in a narrative—this happened, then this, then this—are like a net in which something may be caught that "is not subsequent"—what grace is and, more ineffably, *what it is like*.

Of course the true story of Christ crucified and raised for us all is the soul of preaching. It is the soul of worship itself.

Where will our best stories come from?

"I will open my mouth in parables and utter things hidden from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 13:35). Our best stories are found within the Scriptures themselves and in the teaching of the Rabbi from Nazareth.

These are the stories to which the Spirit has married himself. Without needing to pry open the mind of the Spirit to know why he communicates as he does, his love for stories is evident across the entire scope of the Bible. The Word has the ultimate stamp of "narrative coherence"—it all *hangs together* in Christ—and "narrative fidelity"—by the Spirit *it rings true*. The "good reasons" it provides are to die for.

Let me mention two of the narrative strategies that the Scriptures model in particular. "Narrative transportation" names the way the Scriptures steal us away, for example, to a mountainside in the Sinai Peninsula where a bush burns but does not burn up. The whole atmosphere of the place is the infinitive qualitative difference between God and us.

"Identification" is the way we come to "share human stuff" with Moses on our knees, feeling with him the enormity of his calling and the overlap of our identities as men who some days want to cry out, "Who am I that I should lead these people?" Similarly, the inspired writer of the book of Ruth wrote high theology into the mouth of a woman who struggles with grief and loss.

In an earlier issue, I mentioned the "epidemiological approach" to the Scriptures, or, catching the mood of these texts like a contagion. When Alexander Pope wrote, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread," he was commenting on the seldom recognized problem of talkativeness on the subject of God. He means those who prattle on about the deep mysteries of God with scholarly detachment as if talking about a strange bird or a shiny rock.

Not Naomi. We grieve with her so as to arrive where she does at the first mention of her redeemer, "*Yahweh* has not abandoned his loving kindness to me!" (Ruth 2:20)

We do not want to excavate the meaning of our text and then discard the form, as if the story itself didn't matter, or as if there's

no compelling reason divine revelation has come to us in the way it has. We would do violence to the parables of Jesus by bogging down in an academic study of what sort of corn the prodigal fed to what sort of pigs. Let the story be the story.

One of our fathers, you may know, made it his practice to begin a sermon on a New Testament text by drawing on the well of inspired accounts found in the Old Testament, and *vice versa*. I can't imagine your search would ever end in disappointment when you go looking for an account from the other testament, so to speak, that is asking to be brought into conversation with your text.

Is preaching to become story time?

To paraphrase E. M. Forster:

"The queen died. The king died. Those are facts.

The queen died, and the king died of a broken heart. *That's a story.*"

Notice from this example that we are not necessarily thinking of long, rambling narratives. Some people who study narrative communication advise us to think instead about the disproportionate power of a *two-minute story wrapped around a compelling image*.

The disproportionate power of a two-minute story wrapped around a compelling image.

The LORD speaks through Isaiah about a vineyard set on a fertile hill. He cleared the stones and built a tower. He planted it with choice vines. He hewed a winepress to hold the good grapes this vineyard would surely produce for him. But what he found was reason enough to destroy the whole thing outright. And then we find out.

"Israel is the vineyard."

A two-minute story wrapped around an image.

If there's any chance that Walter Fisher is right about our being "hard-wired for narrative," I don't think we need to resist what is palpable in preaching. It is natural that the attention of our listeners waxes and wanes across the span of twenty minutes. And we may need to risk taxing their ability to hang with us when crucial doctrinal content takes some time to expound. But when the first few words of a story leave our mouths—"So my dad used to take me fishing..."—we can feel our people perking up and coming back to us. Or is it just me? I don't think so.

Rather than turning preaching into story time, we are not wrong to notice the *features* of the story form that allow it to do what it does as a communicative event, for example, the way a baked-in conflict or obstacle or tension entangle its hearers. We cannot *not* listen for how the thing can possibly be resolved. That observation about the structure of narrative can inform the way we introduce a sermon in an attention-arresting way without overtly using narrative at all.



No, preaching isn't story time. But there is time for a good story. Whenever I divide my communication classroom into four corners according to four personalities that you'll find in any group, I ask students in each corner, "What would you like to tell the rest of us about how to communicate with you?" Inevitably, one particular corner of the room will say, "Tell us a story. That's how we get it." Then another corner will chime in, "And it needs to touch our hearts. We won't learn if you leave that part of us out."

"Lose the autobiography?"

I told a story of my Aunt Marie in a sermon one time. A colleague I revere complimented my message, but then said, "Preaching is proclamation. So lose the autobiography."

I'll admit that I struggle with that counsel when it comes to drawing on our own life experiences as preachers. I made that adjustment for more than a year and received the feedback from someone close to me, "You've changed what you do in the pulpit. And for me, something is missing."

Episodic memory is vastly more powerful than eidetic memory.

There are some obvious pitfalls to avoid. The pulpit is not our personal confessional. On the other hand, God forbid we make ourselves the hero in our own stories, when that position belongs to another. And the truth is, our wives and children should not cringe or live in dread of what may come out of our mouths that is private and theirs alone.

How much we value transparency may be a generational thing. This is a generalization, but it seems to me that the college students I serve would say, "Show me some glimmer of understanding that life is hard, and that you know what struggle is. That's when you have my attention."



How we feel about our lives makes sense within the way we tell our story. So there's something we can model as we tell our stories with more true Christian optimism and less of a grumble for having Jesus drawn into our frame, even as he has drawn us into his.

So, while I personally conclude that “less is more” when it comes to what we share from the pulpit, I have been blessed by those brief, scattered glimpses into the lives of the preachers who have served me well. I say this in the spirit of the letter to the Hebrews: “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7).

Why use imagery?

Illustration is not confined to the story form. Our use of images can be brief but impactful.

Jonathan Edwards once spoke of the futility of saving ourselves through good works. This he captured with the image of a spider-web that cannot even slow a falling rock. He had a gift for tying a truth to a sensory experience as a way to impress it indelibly on his hearers.

The Scriptures themselves are a saturation of mental pictures.

That is an original image. But notice again that the Scriptures themselves are a saturation of mental pictures. Kenneth Burke relishes the “*this-ness* of that and the *that-ness* of this” to explain how images work. How is the mercy of God like an ocean? How is an ocean like the mercy of God? We are getting to the essence of things as we come to see the one in the light of the other.

What imagery has in common with story is that both are *maieutic*. That is, they leave work for the listener to do. We leave room

for the listener to complete the meaning, such as when we pray, “Keep me as (literally) the *little man* of your eye” (Psalm 17:8). Look close into the eye of God. What do you see there? What does it mean? David doesn't say.

Likewise, we want to allow people to linger over an image like that, to let it hang in the air a bit. Why? Because we know that truth can be made more fully one's own for that moment we have prepared of, “Ooh! I get that!”

This doesn't mean leaving things to chance. The listener's effort must be rewarded. One approach would be that early in our message we let the story be the story, as I say, or let the image be the image, but then we can come back to it in the end to be sure we've left no one scratching their heads.

The apple of God's eye. The beauty there is an aspect of the meaning. The incandescent moments in Scripture are not merely a way to say more impressively what could have just as well been said another way. They bring us into closer contact with what we already know. They help us not only to know what we know, but to *love* what we know as well.

The incandescent moments in Scripture ... bring us into closer contact with what we already know.

Where do illustrations come from?

My Dad used to say, “You can tell a pastor who reads from one who does not.” He was referring to the quality of the man's words and the freshness of his thoughts. They will not be what they could be if he impoverishes himself to the narrow confines of his own thinking or experience.

To “the pastor who reads” we can add: the pastor who tunes in to the world when it is telling its best stories, such as they are, revealing its rebellion, its idolatries, its hunger, and its need. We can add: the pastor who is curious—who engages in history and art, fiction and non-fiction, movies, music, and all the rest of popular culture. Out comes an introduction based on the Isak Dinesen's story, “Babette's Feast” or the poignant chorus of Jason Isbel's, “If We Were Vampires.” Talk about packing a wallop.

Above all, to the pastor who reads, we add: the pastor who inhabits the biblical world, immersing in and absorbing its stories, images, poems, and songs.

What does it look like when Truth gets up and walks around? When it wears a human face? Look there. It is the Lord Christ strolling among the lampstands and holding their stars in the palms of his hands.