



The Evolution of the Story Sermon

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The story, or narrative, sermon is one of the cutting edges of contemporary homiletical research and literary production.¹ That the exploration of “story” by theologians, biblical scholars, secular writers, and story tellers should rub off on preaching would seem to be inevitable. Homiletically, an evolutionary process that has seen the shape of the sermon radically altered in less than a quarter of a century began with the publication in 1958 of H. Grady Davis’ volume, *Design for Preaching*. He pointed out that preachers “forget that the gospel itself is for the most part a simple narrative of persons, places, happenings, and conversation...[and] not a verbal exposition of general ideas.” He insisted that “nine-tenths of our preaching is verbal exposition and argument, but not one tenth of the gospel is exposition. Its ideas are mainly in the form of a story told.” And so Davis, after identifying the three functional forms for preaching—Proclamation, Teaching, and Therapy²—proceeded to delineate and describe five organic forms that the sermon might take. The fifth form was “a story told.”³

Grady Davis’ volume, despite its wide-spread and continued use as a textbook in homiletics, was open-ended and radical. He discarded the traditional classification of sermons—topical, textual, expository—with the substitution of his “form follows function” approach to sermon content and shape. His organic forms had to do with what he called biblical preaching; four of them were widely used, but the last—“a story told”—was to be found primarily in the pulpit work of one preacher, Peter Marshall.⁴ Most of Marshall’s printed sermons, when carefully studied, tend to be narrative in form. Davis believed that Marshall’s best ser-

¹Papers given at the Academy of Homiletics meeting in 1979 were on *Preaching and Story*. In 1980 they were on *Preaching and Worship*. The 1980 discussion will continue in joint session with the North American Academy of Liturgics in January of 1982.

²See chapters 7, 8, and 9 in *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958).

³*Ibid.*, 157-162. Davis followed Andrew W. Blackwood’s experience of three ways to study (and teach) preaching: (1) the science of homiletics; (2) the art of preaching; and (3) the study of sermons.

⁴*Ibid.*, 158. See also sermons in collections like Marshall’s *Mr. Jones, Meet the Master* (New York: Ravell, 1949).

mons were his biblical narratives, such as “The Grave in the Garden.” *Preaching the Story*, by Edmund Steimle, Morris Niedenthal, and Charles Rice (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), picks up Davis’ “a story told” organic form and develops it in the light of change and contemporary scholarship.

Twenty-two years passed between the publication of *Design for Preaching* and that of *Preaching the Story*, as well as Richard A. Jensen’s *Telling the Story* (Minneapolis: Augsburg,

1980). The interim has seen evolution occurring in both worship and preaching. Both began a period of experimentation touched off—for liturgics—by Vatican II, and—for homiletics—by the communication revolution and related research. Reuel Howe's *The Miracle of Dialogue* (New York: Seabury, 1963), published one year before Amos Wilder's *The Language of the Gospel: Early Christian Rhetoric* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), made an immediate impact upon preaching and was followed up with his volume, *Partners in Preaching* (New York: Seabury, 1967). So began a decade or so of experimenting with dialogical sermon forms, some of which were narrative.⁵ Homiletical experimentation overlapped with experimental liturgies during this same period of time.

The evolutionary process found the churches working through experimentation in worship and arriving at a kind of “consensus liturgy” for contemporary use before the preachers solved the sermon shape problem that Clyde Reid called “the old preaching pattern.”⁶ Thor Hall, trained in theology as well as homiletics, attempted to change the pattern in 1971 with his *The Future Shape of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) that linked communication and theology in what he called “the next context” of preaching, but experimental preaching continued into the mid-1970s. John Killinger followed up his *The Centrality of Preaching in the Total Task of the Ministry* (Waco: Word, 1969) with two volumes of experimental sermons which he edited and introduced this way: “The words ‘experimental preaching’ suggest that it is a new kind of preaching. Actually it is and it isn't... There has always been experimentalism at work among authentic preachers. The central problem which all speakers face [is] of having something significant to say and discovering forms of discourse to shape the communication of that something....”⁷ For preaching the gospel is a “given,” and so Killinger addressed the form problem.

Christian preaching also received fresh stimuli to alter sermon shape from the liturgical-homiletical results that followed study and experimentation.⁸ New lectionaries to serve the liturgy and preaching, and patterned after the Roman Catholic *Ordo Lectionis Missae*, began to appear in the Anglican and Lutheran communions and to spread to many other Protestant denominations too. Most churches adopted a three-year lectionary, appointing three lessons—usually

⁵William Thompson and Gordon Bennett collaborated on a book of *Dialogue Preaching: The Shared Sermon* (Valley Forge: Judson) in 1969.

⁶See Reid's Chapter 1, “The Preaching Crisis,” *The Empty Pulpit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) 21-33.

⁷John Killinger, *Experimental Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973) 9.

⁸Adrian Nocent's *The Future of the Liturgy* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963) is important for understanding in these areas, especially his “pastoral principle” of “rallying people around the Word” in Scripture, sermon, and sacraments. An example of how far-reaching the liturgical-homiletical renewal has extended is seen in *Word and Table* (New York: Abingdon, 1976), which is a manual setting forth “a basic pattern of Sunday worship for United Methodists.”

from the Old Testament as First Lesson, usually from the Epistles as Second Lesson, and the Gospel—for Sundays and festivals. The chief lesson, the Gospel, is also the Gospel of the year; it is read as a continuing story for 60% of the year (Epiphany and Pentecost), and appropriately selected stories are appointed to highlight the other 40% of the church year embraced by the Christmas and Easter cycles. The liturgical-homiletical intention of the lectionaries was transparent. The preachers reading them as the Story (or, if lectors are used in worship, the

preacher reads the Gospel) are expected to use them in biblical preaching, but how? What form, or forms, should contemporary biblical preaching employ?

In his *Proclaiming God's Message* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1965), the first Roman Catholic theology of preaching to appear after Vatican II and fundamental to a revival of preaching in the Roman Church, Domenico Grasso, S.J., took a form-follows-function approach to sermon shape. With Davis he suggests that preaching has three different functions: first, preaching to non-Christians (missionary preaching) calls for proclamation of the Gospel; second, preaching to immature believers (catechization) takes the form of teaching the Word; and third, preaching to mature Christians (to renew and build up their faith) is liturgical preaching. Proclamation has as its goal the acceptance of the faith, teaching emphasizes knowledge of the faith, and through the homily—its form—liturgical preaching “tries to give life to the Faith already accepted and understood.”⁹ He also speaks of “the stylistic difference (between teaching and homily). In catechesis the style is didactic so that it appeals to the rational....In the homily the style is more lyrical and vivacious because it must move the will.”¹⁰ Grasso wrote an as-yet untranslated book of homiletics in 1968, *La Predicazione alla Comunità Christiana*, to speak to the forms that would accomplish this goal in liturgical preaching and the homily. In both books, he helped to prepare the way for the homily, as liturgical preaching, to become narrative in form.

Interpretation and Imagination, by Charles Rice (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), was the volume on story sermons that, more than most other works in homiletics or related fields, turned the attention of preachers in the direction of narrative sermon forms. His 109-page discussion of the story sermon moves from “The Homiletical Task: Where Faith Meets Culture” to a practical chapter on practical “Rubrics” by way of “Literary Art and the Content of Sermon” and another chapter on “Literature and the Form of the Sermon.” Rice investigates the interconnections between culture, literature, theology, and the content of the sermon and insists that “by way of suggesting the sermon’s form, the preacher ought not to be embarrassed by story.”¹¹ He contends that “contemporary literature and Christian theology agree in the forms they suggest for preaching: story, a proper sequence between grace and ethics, indirection and understatement, the man as message.” And he argues that such a form—story—“makes a large place for literature in the content of the sermon and gives to story a prime place in the sermon’s format.”¹² Rice unites content and form through story.

⁹See Grasso’s discussion of the “three moments of faith” in his chapter, “The Forms of Preaching” (pp. 222-23).

¹⁰Ibid., 231.

¹¹*Interpretation and Imagination*, 66.

¹²See the section on “The Man Is the Message,” beginning on p. 75., part of the chapter on “Literature and the Form of the Sermon.”

The fifth chapter of Rice’s book is simply called “Sermons.” All his examples are story sermons, based on biblical texts, but taking their “story-lines” from a poem, a play, two novels, and a movie. He simply tells the story in some of them, following his own dictum, “A new rubric emerges: Contemporary literature may well be its own application....The application, then, may be in the story itself.”¹³ The stories become the sermons; applications and interpretations are built in. The texts, usually, are not discussed or brought directly into the sermons. The reader assumes

that the lesson would be read before the sermon so that the story sermon illuminates the text for the people in a stimulating, open-ended manner. One of his sermons, “No Clockwork Orange,” also found its way into John Killinger’s collection, *Experimental Preaching*, in 1973, as a kind of harbinger of homiletical sermon shape yet to come.

The homiletical books of the 1970s reveal the continuing concern with communication, on the one hand, and with biblical preaching—and its forms—on the other. The impact of story upon the form of preaching surfaces in various ways in the books of Clyde Pant, Clement Welsh, Foster McCurley, Elizabeth Achtemeier, Fred Craddock, Ronald Sleeth, Milton Crum, and Fred Buechner, who are some of the persons making significant contributions to contemporary homiletical literature. Story-theologians and biblical scholars began to be more clearly heard by those concerned with, and about, preaching. As the 1980s began, two new books about story sermons emerged in this evolutionary process, the Steimle-Niedenthal-Rice *Preaching the Story* and Richard Jensen’s *Telling the Story*. Both have roots in the functional-organic thesis of H. Grady Davis, while drawing on contemporary writers and thinkers to develop their quite different concepts about narrative preaching, “a story told.”

Jensen writes about the three types of preaching that he is able to identify—Proclamation, Teaching, and Story Preaching—and illustrates each type with his own sermons in demonstration of the validity of each of the types. But it is patently clear that his main concern is with the story sermon and its possibilities for revitalizing the preaching ministry of the church. Not only does he claim that 90% or more of contemporary preaching is didactic, but he also insists that it (didactic preaching) “is woefully inadequate to carry the whole load of preaching.”¹⁴ Jensen’s criticisms of the problems of preaching are certainly valid, but the basic problem is functional and liturgical, not simply the teaching form and shape of the sermon. Many pastors believe that their function in the Office of the Word is to teach the meaning of the Word to the Sunday gathering of the community as though this portion of the Holy Communion were the *missa catechumenorum* of the 16th century. Could it be that the extra-liturgical “children’s sermon” that has gained in popularity in so many congregations is, or ought to be, the remnant of catechization in Sunday worship? Recent research in liturgics and homiletics suggests that this has yet to be explored in depth.¹⁵

¹³Clement Welsh makes a similar point—“the illustration may be the entire sermon”—in his *Preaching in a New Key* (Philadelphia: United Church, 1974) 109. Cf. C. Rice, *Interpretation and Imagination*, 96.

¹⁴*Telling the Story*, 9-10.

¹⁵Should the “children’s sermon” be a teaching “moment,” a mini-*missa catechumenorum*, which the adults, too, will hear and learn?

Proclamatory preaching finds greater favor with Jensen than didactic preaching because this method of preaching the gospel gets “closer to the heart of who Jesus is for us today.” Proclamation is not information but announcement of good news—and here he is in touch with Davis—in the present tense and through use of the first or second persons. His proclamatory sermons are done in a kind of blank verse style not unlike the format that Peter Marshall made popular nearly four decades ago. But story preaching is a functional form to Jensen, and his concern with the story sermon parallels that of Grady Davis: “The aim of the sermon is participation and involvement of the hearer in the gospel story.”¹⁶ Moreover, he writes, “Always

begin with a text. Story Preaching must be anchored firmly in a given text(s) of Scripture.”¹⁷ Jensen’s Story Preaching is clearly one type of “a story told.” It keeps the “evolutionary door” open in preaching.

Jensen’s textual material on the story sermon ought to be read in the context of Thor Hall’s work with McLuhan and the communication revolution and along with Steimle’s key chapter (*Preaching the Story*) on “The Fabric of the Sermon,” in which he draws heavily on Amos Wilder’s *Early Christian Rhetoric* for his story form for the “a story told” type of sermon. But Jensen’s story sermons ought to be read alongside of Charles Rice’s “sermons” for comparison of form and content. For example, read Jensen’s “The Lonely Lady of Blairstown Park” over against Charles Rice’s “The First and the Last.”¹⁸ Similarities in understanding and conception of the story sermon—and some differences, too—are readily perceptible to the reader.

The type of sermon—“a story told”—that *Preaching the Story* suggests to preachers is one evolutionary extension of Davis’ “a story told” organic form, and deliberately so. This book was conceived to pick up the cutting edge of Davis’ *Design for Preaching* and hone it to homiletical sharpness that will accommodate biblical theology, worship, and preaching today. It modernizes the biblical sermon, but in a manner that expands the ancient concept of the homily as “marching through the text,” and resembles the classic running commentary expository-sermon form. Instead of explaining the text verse by verse, making applications and arguments, adding (or “weaving in”) illustrations, Steimle *tells the story of the text*; it is the “story-line” of the sermon to which he adds other stories and dramatic description and commentary.¹⁹ William J. Carl, in his response to Don M. Wardlaw’s “Eventful Sermon Shapes” (*Preaching and Story*, Academy of Homiletics, 1979), declares that the multi-verse text preached in story fashion “means returning to a kind of expository preaching,”²⁰ but with a radical difference, a biblical story line that gives narrative quality and shape. It is *telling*, not *explaining*, the text.

The strength—and perhaps the weakness, too—of *Preaching the Story* is that “a story told” is limited to a type of sermon that Edmund Steimle has perfected

¹⁶*Telling the Story*, 135.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁸R. Jensen, *Telling the Story*, 162; C. Rice, *Interpretation and Imagination*, 136.

¹⁹Read Chapter 7, “The Biblical Story of Good and Evil,” in conjunction with Chapter 10, “The Fabric of the Sennon,” in *Preaching the Story*.

²⁰Wardlaw’s “Eventful Sermon Shapes” picks up, in a way, where Steimle leaves off, and Carl’s analysis suggests, indirectly, how evolution might continue in sermon form.

and preached over the years, a biblical narrative, to the exclusion of other types of story sermons. “Tell Me Thy Name” (on Genesis 32:22-30, Jacob at the Jabbok River) is a superb example of “a story told” that is found in his 14-year-old volume of sermons, *Disturbed by Joy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967). A more recent example is his “The Stranger” in *God the Stranger* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). Sermons by Fred Buechner, Joseph Sittler, and Steimle (two) belong to the mid-60s in published form. Although Charles Rice is one of the co-authors of *Preaching the Story*, his type of story sermons—neither text nor examples—finds no place in the book and would seem to make it incomplete, despite the other significant chapters by Steimle and several other contributors.

This rather cursory study of the evolution of the story sermon from Grady Davis to Jensen

and Steimle-Niedenthal-Rice makes it very clear that the sermon has changed radically in form in this past quarter century, and that the story sermon has been developed in several ways. Since all of those writing in this area are concerned with biblical preaching, as well as story, and since there is variety in how story sermons should be done, it seems that the evolution of the story sermon will continue to develop new shapes, just as the expository sermon developed several variations. If nothing else, the present varieties of story sermon—"a story told"—need to be drawn together (Jensen's chapter on "Story Preaching" would fit, with revision, very nicely into *Preaching the Story*) into a single volume. That book hasn't been written, as yet.